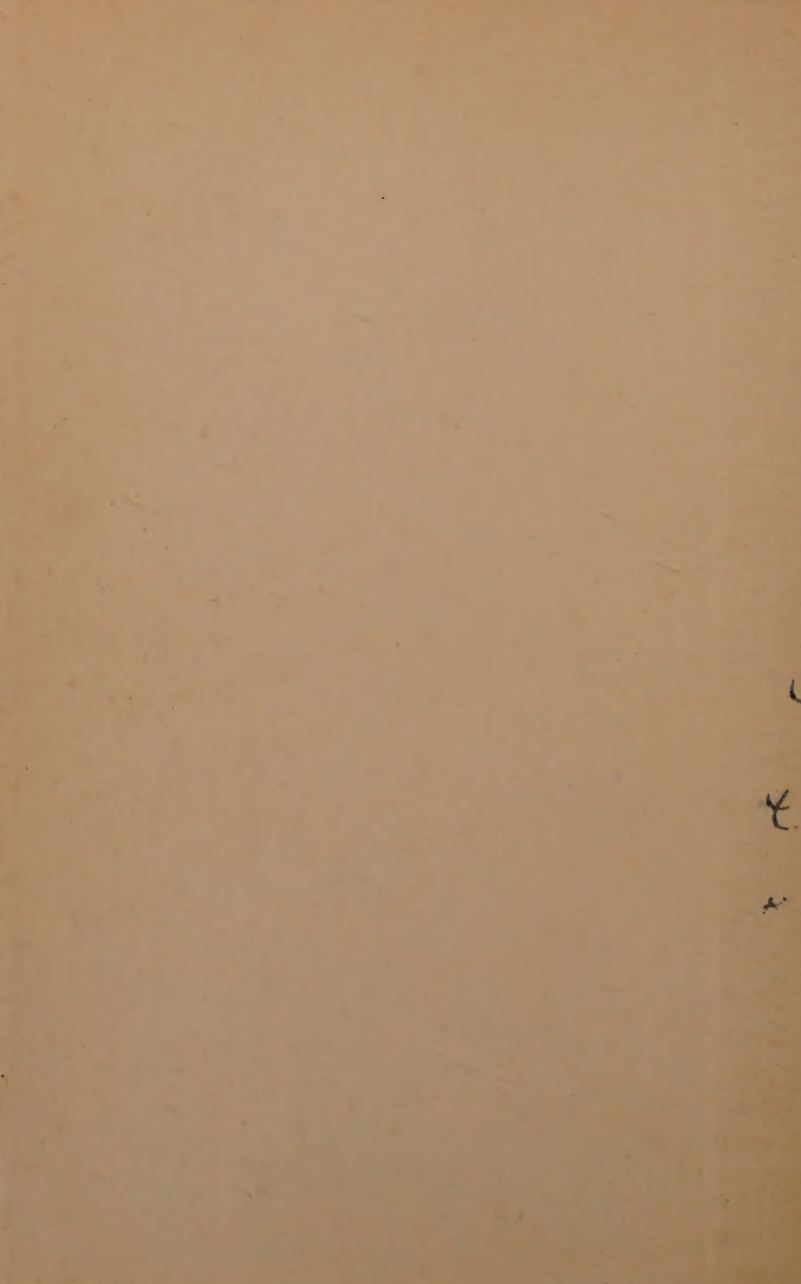


SONIA



BY VIDA HURST



J. C. Linn

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GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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Sonia

CHAPTER I

As Mrs. Maine opened the door Sonia and Joe Carter sprang apart. But not quickly enough!

She had seen him kissing Sonia!

It was, as Mrs. Maine said, disgusting. Seventeen years old and alone in the room where the girls had left their coats, with no light! Sidney Maine was giving a farewell party to the senior class of the Stockton High School, which Mrs. Maine, relating the episode, was careful to explain as the reason for Sonia's presence.

Everyone knew that Sidney Maine liked Sonia. But everyone knew, too, that Sonia went too far for one whose social position was not secure. Her father was a grocery clerk, her mother a dressmaker. Even so, Sonia might have made the grade had she been more circumspect. But Stockton mothers distrusted her. And not without reason. It had been rumored that she not only smoked but she dangled cigarets, loosely, from her lips, without holding them.

"She's wild," the mothers had concluded.

And no one challenged the statement. Least of all, Sonia, who faced Sidney's mother now, head high, green eyes blazing in her white face.

"Do you think this is any way for young people to act?" Mrs. Maine gulped, fumbling for her poise and the electric switch at the same time. As a matter of fact she was much more embarrassed than either of them. Joe Carter was shame-faced, but grinning.

"Aw, Mrs. Maine, we didn't mean any harm. Did we, Sonia?"

But the girl, tossing her head a trifle higher, refused to answer. Without a word of apology or explanation, she seized her coat and left the house.

Sonia stalked through the summer street, swiftly. Joe Carter, rather tardily gallant, had to run to catch her.

"My gosh, Sonia, this is no way to act. We hadn't done anything."

She faced him, stormily.

"Do you think I'd stay in that awful house after that? Having her think things. . . ."

She flung away as he attempted to take her arm.

"Leave me alone. Don't."

"Well, but Sonia . . . my gosh . . . this is awful! It isn't my fault she opened the door."

"Your fault the light was off," she said, darkly.

"You looked so tantalizing. And you hadn't forgotten your handkerchief, you know. I saw you stick it down your neck before you missed it. You wanted me to come after you. Didn't you, old dear?"

The girl said nothing but her pace slowed into his. His hand crept down her arm.

"You wanted me to kiss you, didn't you, Sonia? Are you sorry I did?"

"No," she answered.

Hand in hand they walked through the poignant sweetness of a California night. The dim lanterns of the stars glowed above them. There was a young moon hanging, crescent-shaped, detached. Sonia caught her breath.

"Isn't it wonderful?"

"You are wonderful," the boy whispered, awkwardly.

"No, I mean the night—life—everything! It's like what the minister said in the baccalaureate sermon! We are standing on the threshold of life. And what does it hold for us? I wish I knew."

"Better take it as it comes, old dear! And not worry over the future. It holds a devil of a lot of work for yours truly. I'm going into the garage with Dad next week. Overalls and grease for me. And I like it!"

"But wouldn't you like to know?" she persisted, dreamily.

"Wouldn't you like to look in a glass and see the next few years unroll before you? I would!"

"See, maybe, Sonia, dancing in a silver gown, with an emerald ring on her hand. I like emeralds, Joe, better than diamonds. And my hands aren't bad."

She sent them, like frail messengers, to his lips for a kiss.

"Sonia, when you talk like that, you seem like somebody else. I'm half afraid of you. Why are you so different from other girls?"

"How could I be like them?" she asked, frankly. "I've never had any of the things they're used to. Think how miserable I'd be if I tried to imitate them. I have had to be myself, Joe, and live in my own world. While they go away to summer camps or to the mountains where it's cool, I have been at home washing dishes!"

"I know and it's a darned shame. . . ."

"Oh, don't! I wasn't asking for pity. I don't want that from anybody."

She drew herself proudly erect.

"I am seeing visions while I wash the dishes, you see. And I have my own ideas and plans for the future. No one need be sorry for me."

They had reached her door now. As if by common consent, they drew closer together and lowered their voices.

"I'll bet your ideas are pretty grand, aren't they?"

"It will take a whole lot of money to carry them out. I can tell you that."

He said, wistfully, "I suppose that lets me out. You don't see a little bungalow down across from the garage in that kind of a dream!"

She slid her hands into his.

"I'm afraid not, Joe. No bungalows in my dreams. But I like you an awful lot."

"You liked to kiss me?" he asked timidly, hopefully.

Sonia laughed.

"I think I might have, but in the grand uproar that followed I was too stunned to notice whether I liked it or not."

He put both arms about her slender young body.

"Sonia, kiss me again."

But she drew away.

"A kiss," said Sonia, with infinite wisdom, "is like lobster. One must be in just the right condition for one."

"You mean you aren't now?"

"Exactly!"

"But you were tonight in that dark room, with the noise and singing going on outside?"

"It was exciting waiting in the dark for you to find me. There was kick to that."

"Sonia, you little devil . . . there's kick to it now. Kiss me. Kiss me, Sonia! I'll guarantee the kick."

But she eluded him, ducking easily from his embrace. During the scuffle, there was the sound of a window being raised.

"Sonia!"

"Yes, Mother."

"Come on in, now."

"All right! Joe, you'll have to go."

"Sonia, please!"

"No," she cried, impatiently.

He said, with the bitterness of 17, "I suppose you've kissed so many fellows there's nothing to it for you."

"You lie, Joe Carter."

"What do you mean, lie?"

"I mean," Sonia flared, "that the kiss you gave me in Sidney's bedroom tonight was the first kiss I've had from a boy—ever. And I hate you!"

Leaving the boy astounded by both her violence and the information Sonia ran up to the steps and banged the door.

As she turned on the light she stared at the ugly untidiness confronting her. The sewing machine littered with silk scraps and a pin cushion, bursting with pins, symbol of her mother's profession. Sonia hated that pin cushion. In those dreams of hers she had cut it into shreds, burned it, thrown it into the river. Her mother had a way of mumbling, with her mouth full of pins, "Sonia, hand me my pin cushion!"

There was a battered leather couch which Sonia had adorned with turquoise silk pillows. The color gave her a thrill of exquisite joy, as did the Japanese print she had selected, flamingo red. But an ironing board stood beneath it with a cold iron. Mrs. Stillwater's new foulard dangled on a hanger from the bracket light.

"I hate it!—hate it!—hate it!" muttered Sonia, throwing her coat on a chair.

Her mother stood at the sink in the kitchen, stacking dirty dishes.

"I didn't expect you home so soon," she said, in her colorless voice. "It isn't 11 o'clock."

"You told me to come in," evaded Sonia.

"Yes, I didn't want you hanging on the front steps with that boy. But how did the party happen to be over?"

"Oh, Mother! Why is a party ever over? Don't ask me! It's over, that's all."

Anna Marsh stood for a moment, hands on her hips.

"What's the matter, Sonia? Didn't you have a good time?"

"Of course I did. Why?"

"I don't know. But evidently you didn't. I wish you'd talk to me more. There are a lot of things about you I don't understand."

"Now, Mother . . ."

"Why shouldn't you have a good time with girls and boys your own age? It wasn't your dress. That's perfect. I'm willing to say there wasn't a girl there with a prettier dress than yours."

She eyed the lines of the shell pink chiffon, admiringly.

"Right you are, darling!" Sonia answered, gratefully. "My clothes are always perfect. If I'm not a social success you certainly aren't to blame. Where's Father?"

"Where is he always when you're having a date?"

Sonia went to the back porch and peered out. "Daddy?"
"Yes, honey!"

She opened the screen door and slipped out to the steps.

"You can come on in now. Your wandering child is home."

He puffed at his pipe before he answered, gently, "Does it make you mad because I sit up and wait for you?"

"Oh, no! It makes me feel fine to know you're out here on the back steps worrying about me all the time I'm gone."

"I'm not worrying about you, honey. You know your dad thinks you're the finest girl that ever lived."

Sonia smiled.

"It's just that I can't get used to the idea that you're old enough to go out alone with the boys at night."

"Well, I'm out of high school now. I guess that ought to be old enough. Dad, I want to go to work."

He rose, rather heavily for so short a man, and re-entered the kitchen. Sonia followed him.

"Daddy, did you hear what I said? I want to go away from here and get a job. I could be a bookkeeper. I was head of my class."

"I can't let you go away from home, honey. You're too young." The face he turned to her was lined with the years of his futile struggle to get ahead. "But if you want to find something to do here in Stockton . . ."

"Never! I'll die first. I won't stay in this town another month."

White-faced, they stared at each other.

"Sonia, what do you mean?"

"I mean I hate it. I hate the narrow-minded, suspicious people. I hate this house, the disorder, the dishwashing. I hate myself and the things I find myself doing. . . ."

"But, Sonia, you're not going away. I won't let you. You can't . . ."

"I will!" she cried, passionately. "I'm going to San Francisco, where I can live my own life. And I'll hate you if you try to stop me."

CHAPTER II

It was Sonia's mother who settled the argument.

"That' enough from you, Sonia. Run change your dress and help with these dishes."

"But, Mother, I want this settled right now. . . ."

"There will be plenty of time to decide what you are going to do. You ought to be ashamed to talk to your father like that."

Sam Marsh tapped the ashes from his pipe, nervously. His blue eyes looked beaten and washed with tears. A lump rose suddenly in Sonia's throat. She flung her strong arms about him.

"Daddy! Don't stand there and look so pathetic!"

"But, Sonia, you can't go to San Francisco. . . ."

"Now there you go. Mother is right. We won't discuss it any more tonight."

She kissed him and ran upstairs.

Late that night when the dishes were finished, Sonia stood before the mirror in her cheap golden oak dresser, practicing her art. A cigaret dangled, loosely, from her lips. In her orange striped pajamas she was more like *Vogue* than the pictures themselves. She cultivated it. It was not for nothing that she studied her mother's magazines. Her most cherished possessions were a carved ivory cigaret holder, a picture from *Vogue*, which she had been told at 16 resembled her, and a silk nightgown she had made herself. The gown was cream white, when all the other girls in town were wearing pink or orchid. Distinctive—that was Sonia!

Standing before the mirror, she admitted it, shamelessly. The other girls had beautiful homes, families with wealth and social position. Background! She had nothing but her charming clothes, and a haunting, heart-shaped face, with gray-green eyes. Long ago she had made up her mind to make the most of

them. But there were certain things she did not quite understand.

"I wonder why Sidney's mother looked at me like that?" she pondered. "As if I were something not quite clean."

The memory of the thrill-laden moment before the door opened came to her.

"Oh, God!" she whispered naïvely.

There had been possibilities in that kiss. It was like a flash of fire all through her.

"Then why didn't I want him to kiss me again? In the dark room he was a stranger, unknown, mysterious. But out on the steps he was just Joe Carter, the boy I've gone to school with all my life."

With which conclusion she finished her cigaret, and jumped into bed.

.

Before Sonia was up the next morning she was in disgrace. The news of her escapade the night before had been related over 25 different breakfast tables. And Vera, her married sister, had dressed all three of her children and walked over to tell her parents about it.

By the time Vera arrived, Sonia's father had gone to work. Her mother was sewing, and Sonia was clearing the table. She realized the moment she saw her sister just why she had come.

"Come on in and spread the glad tidings," she said grimly.

"Well, I certainly will. Children, run out in the yard while Mother talks to Grandma. The baby's asleep. I'll leave her in the buggy."

Mrs. Marsh looked up with an absent smile.

"What brings you over so early, Vera? Sonia, my pin cushion!"

"Vera has come over to tell on me, Mother."

"Well, Sonia, can you blame me? Imagine how I felt having Sarah Underwood, that I detest anyway, come in before the dishes are done, to relate what Tom told her."

Mrs. Marsh put down her sewing.

"Girls, what are you talking about? What have you done, Sonia?"

"Let Vera tell you. I'll bet she knows more about it than I do."

"I know enough," declared her sister angrily. "I never was so ashamed in my life. Mother, Sonia was in the bedroom in the dark kissing Joe Carter when Sidney's mother opened the door."

"Sonia, is this true?"

"Yes, Mother."

"So that's the reason you came home early last night? And when I asked you, you didn't tell me."

Sonia said nothing. Her head was in the air. Mrs. Marsh sighed and took up her sewing again.

"I don't know what I'm going to do with you. You don't tell me anything. I know no more about you than if you were some one else's child."

There were tears in her eyes. Like a flash Sonia was at her side.

"Mother, darling! I'm sorry."

"Well, why would you do a thing like that? You knew you shouldn't go into a bedroom with any boy."

"And in the dark, too," put in Vera.

"You shut up," said Sonia to her sister. "I don't know where you come in on this. And I don't know why I did it. So there! Mother, don't cry, please!"

"But I cannot understand. Sonia, hand me my pin cushion! No wonder you aren't invited anywhere when you act like that."

This being only too true, there was no answer for it. Sonia went back to her dishes again, and her mother began to baste the hem in the foulard skirt. Vera sat, thin lips compressed.

"Well, Mother, I suppose you aren't going to do anything about it?"

"What can I do, Vera? She isn't a child anymore."

"Mrs. Underwood said even Tom was horrified. No more automobile rides for you in that car, young lady."

"Who cares?" snapped Sonia.

.

As she was speaking the telephone rang. With no gentle hand she lifted the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Oh, hello, Tom."

"I'm all right. Why?"

"Oh, no! A little thing like that didn't bother me. . . ."

Then Vera and her mother heard the buzzing of an insistent young voice. Then Sonia—

"Well, I promised to go down town. But I'll go. You'll be here at two? All right."

As she left the telephone, the laughter in her narrow eyes leaped out.

"Vera, go on home and tell Tom's mother he's taking me for a ride this afternoon. Go on, darling. Do!"

"I'll do nothing of the kind," Vera replied sharply, then collected her family and left.

Sonia stepped into the Underwood sedan at two o'clock. Her eyes were as guileless as a saint's, her smile copied from Mona Lisa. She sat silent, drinking in the beauty of the country road. Tom's voice brought her sharply from her reverie.

"What did you say?"

"I said you don't seem to realize that you're in awfully bad, Sonia. Sidney's mother is telling that all over town."

Sonia shrugged slim shoulders, without answering.

"My God, Sonia, it's serious. You'll be compromised before that old hen gets through with you."

"I can't be bothered, Tom. Please!"

"Besides," he continued in a different tone, "I was surprised at you, myself. I didn't know you gave a tinker's damn for Joe Carter."

Sonia opened her green eyes.

"I don't. Oh, Joe's all right. . . . I like him."

"Then why would you pick on him to lead into a dark room?"

"It isn't necessary for me to explain my conduct to you, Tom Underwood."

"But, Sonia, it is."

"Why?"

The boy gulped and something in his honest blue eyes hurt Sonia.

"Because I have hoped sometime we could be engaged. And I would not want my wife to be doing things like that before we were married."

"Well, don't worry, old thing! Your wife won't."

He stopped the car and gripped her hands hard.

"Don't you talk like that, so hard and flippant! You're not like that. I know you're not."

"Don't. Leave me alone. Let go my hands."

"I won't. Not until you tell me you didn't mean that. You care for me, Sonia, a little bit. I know you do."

"I don't care for anyone who picks me to pieces all the time."

"I'm not picking you to pieces, dear. You know I've loved you ever since the grades. It just kills me to know you've done a thing like that. And to have my mother know it. It will turn her against you."

"You told her yourself."

"I did not. Mrs. Maine called up before breakfast. Then mother hopped me about it. I wasn't going to tell her."

Sonia relaxed a little with his last words. He drew her closer, hungrily.

"Sonia, you're wonderful! You're different from any other girl in town. You have more of what-ever-it-is than a dozen of them put together."

"More of what, Tom?" This was delicious. The girl's young vanity drank it in.

"I don't know what to call it. You don't chatter like the rest. You are neither sweet tempered nor kind. But there's something about you. . . . God!"

He lifted her vivid, wistful face.

"Won't you wait for me, Sonia? I've loved you so long."

"But you're going away to college."

"Only four years."

"Four years! Why, I'd be 21. Anything might happen in that time. I'm going to San Francisco and go to work."

Tom released her then and started the car.

"If you're going to San Francisco it's all up. You'll never come back."

"That suits me perfectly. I'd be glad never to see this no-man's-land again, ever."

Silence then, for a mile or more. Sonia's eyes were gleaming with visions of lights and jewels—and a dancing gown of silver cloth. . . . But the boy's eyes were full of pain.

"I won't believe you're as hard-boiled as you try to make yourself seem."

"Believe anything you like."

"Inside of you there is a sweet, tender, little Sonia, which is shy and afraid. . . ."

"Oh, all right!"

"I can see it in your face, Sonia. The other is nothing but pose."

"I never pose," she assured him coldly. "You ought to know me better than that."

He headed the car back towards town. As they neared the city limits he said earnestly, "Will you promise me one thing?"

"That all depends."

"Well, it shouldn't be so hard. Just promise to consider what I've said this afternoon before you make any definite plans. I can get my father to give you a job in the store if you have to work. And we'll be engaged. I'll get you a diamond, Sonia."

"When?"

"This week. I have a \$1000 check from my grandfather." She lifted her head and looked at him clearly.

"Do you really think my freedom can be bought with a diamond ring?"

"But don't go to San Francisco, Sonia, that's all."

"No! I should stay here in this awful town and wait for you four years."

"Think it over, anyway. Promise that you'll consider it before you definitely make up your mind to go away."

"You ask me to do that knowing your mother would simply have a fit?"

His eyes were humble but very eager. Sonia watched him curiously.

"We would win Mother over in time. I want you, Sonia." Suddenly she turned away.

"I'll think about it," she said.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Sonia reached home after her ride with Tom Underwood, she found her mother feverishly pressing Mrs. Stillwater's foulard.

Sonia watched her silently. She occasionally wondered about her mother. How she could endure the strain of monotonous sewing day after day on other women's clothes? Her well-modeled lips were drawn into a tight line now. Her cheeks were flushed.

"She's worrying about me," thought Sonia.

"Mother," she said, suddenly, "are you going to tell Dad about last night?"

"I haven't decided yet, Sonia. I don't know what I ought to do. I'd certainly tell him if I thought it would do any good."

"It would just make him feel badly," her daughter insinuated softly.

Mrs. Marsh moistened the tip of her forefinger and tested the iron.

"You should have thought of that sooner. It's too late to try to save anybody's feelings now. It's probably all over town."

"Well, supposing it is. There wasn't anything so disgraceful about it. Believe me, I'm not the first girl in that class to get kissed, in a dark room, either. Look at the way Janice Peterson acts all the time."

"Yes, I know. But you can't afford to be talked about. It would be different if your father were president of a bank or something."

"Not that that makes it right," she went on quickly. "No matter who you are, spooning cheapens a girl. Makes her common."

"Poppycock, Mother! I suppose you never kissed anyone but Dad."

Mrs. Marsh sighed. But her eyes evaded Sonia's.

"I ran away from boarding school to marry your father. I hadn't had much chance to be kissing anybody before that."

She folded the foulard carefully between layers of tissue paper, and wrapped a string about the box.

"I promised Mrs. Stillwater you'd bring this over when you came home. She wants to wear it to a dinner tonight."

"Oh, Mother, you aren't going to make me carry that box over to Stillwater's."

"I don't see how it's going to get there any other way."

"Let her send her wonderful doctor son after it."

"Don is only here for a week. He has another half year in the hospital. And his mother said they have engagements for every minute of the time he's home."

"Yes, you bet. She'd make him sound as popular as she could. As if anyone couldn't be a doctor if they had had the money and training he's had."

"Well, you don't begrudge it to him, do you, Sonia? I don't see as it's anything to you. Run on now."

.

Sonia sullenly took the box.

"If you never do anything worse than carry a box under your arm, you won't have anything to be ashamed of."

"Rub it in," grumbled Sonia, swinging down the hot street. "Poor Mother. I don't know as I blame her. But I can't stand it if she tells Dad."

Her mood was not a happy one as she turned in at the Stillwater home. Her cheeks were flushed and not only from the relentless June sun. As she pushed the electric bell at the side door of the large white house, she was conscious of feeling goaded and uncomfortable. To add to her irritation, Don Stillwater answered the door.

"How do you do, Dr. Stillwater," Sonia said, stiffly. "Here is the dress my mother promised to send."

"Oh, hello, Sonia. How you've grown up while I've been away!"

"What did you expect me to do?"

Don laughed.

"But your disposition hasn't improved any. I can see that."

He took the box. As Sonia turned sharply from the door, he said, kindly:

"See here, Sonia, you look all in. It's a shame you had to carry that box over here in the heat. Come in, and I'll get you a glass of lemonade."

"No, thanks. I'm used to the heat."

"I could have come after the dress, just as well as not. Mother is away—an appointment with the dentist. Come in, won't you?"

Sonia hesitated. And he misunderstood her hesitation.

"Mary's in the kitchen. It will be perfectly all right."

Then Sonia's sullen eyes lighted with laughter.

"Don't think that worried me. I'm already in disgrace."

He opened the screen door, and she stepped into the cool dimness of the flower laden hall. Here was beauty, peace, balm for her wounded spirit. She looked about, frankly delighted.

"I've never been inside before. It's beautiful."

As she spoke, she lifted the cheap little hat from her head. The hair clung damply about her face.

"I am awfully warm."

Don led her into the library and pushed out a heavily padded chair.

"Sit down. It's dark in here, but that's what makes it cool. Your eyes will get accustomed to it in a moment. I'll ask Mary to fix the lemonade."

Sonia closed her eyes and sank deeply into the comfort of the cool darkness. When she opened them, Don was back, drawing a chair near hers.

"Now then, young lady, let's hear what you're in disgrace about. Tell your Uncle Donald."

His tone pleased Sonia, who had known him rather vaguely as one of the "big boys." For the first time in her rather reserved 17 years she felt the desire for confession.

"It was at Sidney Maine's party last night. Perhaps you've already heard about it?"

"No, not a thing. I've been out playing tennis all morning."

"It was just this," blurted Sonia. "Sidney's mother opened the door of the room where we had left our coats, and caught Joe Carter kissing me."

His face was expressionless.

"And then?"

"What do you suppose? Righteous indignation on her part. The light was off, too, you see. I took my coat and went home. Joe followed about a block behind me."

Don was watching her curiously. As if she were a specimen of some kind. She resented the impersonality of his expression. She felt that she would have preferred his disapproval.

"Was it a good kiss, Sonia?" he asked suddenly.

"Was it . . . what?"

"A good kiss? Did you enjoy it? Lots of kick, and all that?"

Sonia experienced the thrilling sensation of an airplane swooping from the earth.

"Well, of all things. I like your nerve."

"I merely wondered."

With a little audacious laugh, Sonia slid nearer his chair.

"How much do you wonder?" she dared him.

.

At that inauspicious moment, Mary entered with the lemonade. Her eyes took in Sonia curiously. Don's mother would hear about this. They could be sure of that.

When she had disappeared, the spell was broken. Sonia felt awkward and ill at ease. They drank their lemonade in silence. Then Don spoke, in a well-controlled voice.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have asked you that, Sonia. I was just wondering if you are in the habit of kissing the boys."

The blood congealed in Sonia's veins at his tone.

"And supposing I am, Dr. Don Stillwater?"

He smiled.

"Professional curiosity, that's all. If you are, I've no doubt you're clever at it."

Something in his bantering tone cut Sonia like a sharp knife.

"Well, I'm not," she said, suddenly. For no reason at all, tears stood in the gray-green eyes. "It was the first time I'd ever been kissed in my life, and now the whole town's talking about it."

Don put down his glass of lemonade and came over to her.

"Why, you poor kid! And here I was thinking you a regular little devil in your own home town."

"Everyone does," gulped Sonia.

"But, my dear girl, how can they help it when you pull stuff

like this? You should have known better than to go into a dark bedroom with a boy if you don't expect to be talked about."

"Other girls get kissed."

"Other girls are probably more discreet about it than you were. There's something about you, Sonia, that makes you appear more sophisticated than you really are."

"Do you think I look like the pictures in *Vogue*?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I never read a *Vogue*. But you look entirely too experienced for a 17-year-old girl. Sonia, I think you ought to get away from this little town."

Her eyes shone.

"That's just what I want to do. I want to go to San Francisco and go to work."

"It would be the best thing in the world for you. You're going to be spoiled if you live much longer in this atmosphere. But you'd have to watch your step in a place like San Francisco. No one will talk about you, but it's awfully easy for things to happen to a girl there."

"I want them to happen."

He lifted her face in his hands and looked deep into her eyes.

"No you don't, Sonia. There are a few experiences in life no woman ever wants to go through. Things that scar the soul, that eat like acid—a doctor knows. There are things, Sonia, you want to avoid."

.

His set face frightened her.

"I don't see why you want me to go then."

He smiled at that.

"I want you to go because I think you're smart enough to play the game. You say you're in bad in Stockton. This is only an episode in what I trust will be a very full life. But let it be a lesson to you, Sonia. Don't do things that give people a chance to give you a black eye. You're going away. Everyone will soon forget about it. And when you come back, it will all seem different. What kind of work can you do?"

"I took bookkeeping at school."

"Are you any good at it?"

"Am I?" she answered modestly. "Head of my class."

"That doesn't mean a whole lot. But I take it you know

enough to start. You know, I might be able to get a job for you in my uncle's real estate office.

"Your uncle?"

"By marriage, Sonia. Aunt Grace Stillwater's husband."

"But do you think he'd do it?"

"He might. Uncle Jed is awfully fond of me. Of course, it would be small pay, you understand. In the bookkeeping department with a lot of other girls. You'd probably have to live at the Y. W. for a while."

"I can live in the city jail if I only get there. But, Don, I forgot . . ."

"What is it now?"

"My father. He's awfully opposed to my going away from home."

"If you get a position in my uncle's office, I'll stop in and talk with him. Do you think it would do any good?"

"I don't know. He can be dreadfully stubborn when he makes up his mind."

"Let's cross that bridge when we come to it. I'll write my uncle. Shall I?"

Sonia stood beside him, barely reaching to his shoulder. She put out her hand.

"You don't know what this means to me, Don. And I came in hating you."

"Hating me for what, please?"

"For being Mrs. Stillwater's only son and having thousands of dollars spent on your education, while I had to carry your mother's dresses home."

"Aren't you sorry now?"

"I certainly am. But there really is no reason on earth for you being so nice to me."

He held out her hat, and smiled.

"My interest, as I said before, is purely professional."

"I don't give a damn what it is, if it helps me to get to San Francisco."

"Now look here, young lady. Remember all my good advice. That goes with it."

Her green eyes were inscrutable.

"To be discreet in my indiscretion?"

"That wasn't all of it. You know what I mean."

"Of course I do. But I must go. Your mother will be coming home and I'll be suspected again."

The idea that his mother might suspect him of anything must have amused him. But Sonia saw only kindness in his gray eyes. She thought of him all the way down the street. How tall and dark. Not handsome, but his voice was so deep and interesting. . . . Suddenly her promise to Tom occurred to her. She had forgotten to consider him at all, in her plans for going to San Francisco. Oh, well. Nothing definite had been decided yet.

As she opened the door of her own home, she came upon her father, storming up and down the living room. In his rage he looked like an irate turkey gobbler.

"Come on in here and shut the door!" he shouted. "What's this I hear about you and Joe Carter?"

CHAPTER IV

SAM MARSH was slow to anger but his wrath, once roused, was a veritable cyclone. Sonia made no effort to pacify him. Instead she turned to her mother.

"This is your fault, Mother. I knew he'd act like this."

"Your mother had nothing to do with it," her father interrupted. "I overheard some boys talking in the store today. A fine thing for men to be smirking around about my daughter! If you weren't so big I'd give you a thrashing right now."

"I'm surprised you don't anyway," Sonia said, coldly. She knew how her insolence could hurt.

"What do you mean doing a thing like that? Where do you think it will get you? Don't you realize how people talk?"

He turned on his wife, too.

"Have you talked to her? Has she offered any explanation to you?"

"There isn't any explanation to make, Father," said Sonia quietly. "It just happened, that's all. I went after my handkerchief and Joe shut the door and kissed me."

"And you stand there and admit it? You should hang your head with shame—are you sure that's all there was to it?"

Sonia burst out crying.

"I think you're dreadful. Everyone suspects me of something awful. I didn't do anything. I'm going away and never come back."

Her father melted instantly.

"Come here, Sonia. Here, honey! Your dad doesn't think there was anything bad to it. Only I can't stand having people say things about my baby."

"You said things, too."

"I didn't mean them, honey." He patted her shoulder. "I

know you didn't mean any harm. You mustn't let the boys kiss you, that's all."

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Sonia, opening one eye over his shoulder, saw an inscrutable smile on her mother's face. Why did her mother look like that whenever her father petted her? But she allowed herself to be comforted in his arms until gradually the crisis passed and peace reigned again.

Several days later Sonia announced her intention of spending the day with her sister. Her mother offered no objection, so Sonia set forth.

As she wandered down the sunny street, she was busily rehearsing the events of the last week. She had been kissed, proposed to, and advised by three different serious males, not including her father.

"What is it about me men like?" she was thinking, with the impersonality of an artist. "I never flatter them. I am not beautiful. But they do like me. It's because I'm a mystery. They see things in me I don't have." She grinned, naughtily. "Let 'em see. The more they imagine the better they like it. Sweet fools."

She pushed the straight black hair from her eyes. There was a swiftness about her least motion, a winged precision that gave meaning to her slightest action.

"At least," she concluded, "I am not aimless, spineless, apologetic. Thank God for that."

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As she opened the door of her sister's little house, she heard the baby screaming. Sonia walked through to the kitchen where Marta was almost bursting her tiny lungs with angry cries.

"Well, what's the matter with you?" asked Sonia, rescuing the little derelict from the bottom of the buggy.

The baby's wet mouth dug frantically about her neck.

"Hungry, aren't you? Oh, Vera!"

There was no answer but the door to the basement stood open. Sonia started down with the baby over her shoulder. Vera sat sobbing, half way down the stairs. Garbage was scattered about her. Sonia was startled at the white face lifted to hers.

"What in the world's the matter?"

"Oh, the confounded paper around the garbage broke when I was just tearing my hair to get the kitchen cleaned so I could bathe the baby before her 2 o'clock feeding. I haven't touched the ironing yet and my back is just breaking."

Sonia said, composedly: "Your child seems to need food."

Vera took the baby while Sonia collected the garbage.

"Some mess," she muttered, kicking at the cat.

"Yes, isn't it?" Vera answered, without spirit.

"Say," Sonia demanded suspiciously, "what's eating you anyway?"

Vera brushed the untidy hair from her eyes and answered, irritably.

"I'm going to have another baby. That's all. And when I told Paul last night do you know what he did? Stared at me as if I were crazy, said 'Good Lord,' and walked out the door."

Sonia was dumbfounded. Vera must be terribly low to confide in her like this.

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Vera. Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Certainly not," snapped her sister. "Nothing but have it. And that with precious little sympathy from my husband. Take it from me, Sonia, when you get married, you're nothing but a slave."

"I adored Margaret Ann and I wanted Peter. But everything is so high. A dollar doesn't buy anything any more. I want my children to be clean and well bred. But that takes time and money. How much time can I devote to them when I spend every minute doing work a servant could do? How many new clothes do you suppose this baby had? None, except what was given to her. I can't stand it, that's all."

The despair in her voice sounded like a knell to the listening young girl.

"If marriage is like this, believe me I'll stay out of it," Sonia shuddered. "Come on upstairs and lie down. I'll do the ironing for you and bathe the baby."

Tears rushed again to Vera's swollen eyes.

"Oh, will you, honey? I'm so sick I can't see."

Leaning on Sonia's strong arm she climbed upstairs and fell into her bed. Her thin face, sharpened with work and worry, was etched against the white pillow.

"You don't know what it means to me, Sonia, to be able to lie down."

"Shut your eyes and go to sleep. I won't do more than drown this poor kid."

Sonia's sympathy was as awkward as a boy's. Her heart ached for Vera but she abhorred sentiment, particularly between women.

She bathed the baby, gingerly, almost afraid to touch the tender skin. It roused no maternal instinct in her. Instead she was wishing she could be Paul Warner's wife for about one hour. Wouldn't she tell him a thing or two?

"The dirty dog," muttered Sonia, twisting cotton in the baby's button-hole nose. "Walking out the door like that. Leaving Vera to worry over it all alone."

Vera wasn't bad looking, either. She could have had lots of good times if Paul hadn't insisted on getting married.

Later when the baby was asleep in her buggy and Sonia was banging the iron up and down the ironing board, she heard the front door open. Paul came softly down the hall.

"What's the idea?" she asked, coldly.

He seemed embarrassed to find her there.

"I came home for something. What's the matter with Vera?"

"You ought to know."

Shamed color rose in Paul's cheeks.

"I know. I acted like the devil last night. I didn't see how in the world we were going to manage with four kids."

"I should think if Vera can stand it you ought to be able to bear up," Sonia responded cruelly.

But he seemed in no mood for retaliation now.

"I know. I ought to be kicked."

When he had gone upstairs Sonia found she had left the iron standing on his shirt.

"And I don't give a damn," she said, viciously. "I hope Vera just lays him low."

She listened but there was no sign of conflict from the room upstairs. After a while Paul came down and went away again. The two older children came in begging for bread and butter. And before the ironing was finished it was time for lunch.

Sonia pushed the hair from her perspiring forehead and sighed.

"Think of working like this every day in the week for years."

Through the kitchen window she could see Tom's mother pulling weeds in her garden. She had a disreputable hat flapping about her ears and old kid gloves on her hands.

"Wouldn't she die if she knew Tom had offered to buy me a diamond? I'd like to take him up on that just to see her squirm. Her precious Tommy boy engaged to Sonia Marsh!"

But the thought of Don Stillwater's promise to write his uncle shone in her mind like a lamp. Everything would be all right if she could only get to San Francisco.

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She boiled potatoes for the children's lunch and made a pitcher of iced tea for Vera, with thin piminto sandwiches. Poor Vera had looked so miserable, so unutterably tragic! Sonia fed the children and put them in bed for their naps before she went upstairs. Then with the tea and sandwiches on an old copper tray, she knocked at her sister's door.

She was surprised to find Vera relaxed and smiling. Her cheeks were faintly flushed.

"Bless your heart, Sonia. This is awfully sweet of you."

She sat up to take the tray and Sonia sat down beside her. Every muscle in her body ached.

"Paul came back," confided Vera, between bites, "just to tell me how sorry he was. He said he walked the street for hours last night worrying about me and wondering how we'd manage."

"It was a dandy way to show his sympathy," Sonia remarked, icily.

"Oh, Sonia, you don't understand. Wait until you're married, darling."

"I wasn't so dumb that I couldn't see how you looked this morning. Things haven't changed any since then that I can notice."

"But they have, dear. That's just it. Paul says we will hire some one to do the ironing and he will do the scrubbing at night after he gets home."

She turned to Sonia and her eyes were no longer bitter, but dark and sweet.

"You see, this morning I was bearing it all alone, but now Paul's helping me."

Sonia rose and stalked from the room.

"This is what I get," she thought, "for working like a dog all morning. Paul's helping her!"

What really hurt was that dark sweet look in her sister's eyes.

When she had finished the dishes and straightened the kitchen she decided to go home. She had no desire to meet Paul again. Anyway, she said to herself as she left, this settled Tom's idea.

"I wouldn't marry him for a \$1000 ring."

As she passed the postoffice Don Stillwater came up to her.

"I've just had a reply from my uncle," he said. "If you can arrange to leave next week there will be a place in his office for you."

CHAPTER V

THE world whirled before Sonia's eyes. She caught at Dr. Stillwater's arm.

"You mean . . . oh, honestly, that I have a job waiting me in San Francisco?"

"Does it mean so much to you, Sonia? Get in my car. I'll take you home."

A week earlier Sonia would never have dreamed of being asked to ride in Mrs. Raymond Stillwater's car. But she was too excited over her future to appreciate the present.

"I want to give you a few instructions before you go," said Don. "Better stay at the Y. W. until you've gotten your bearings. They can give you a list of outside rooms. And don't get in automobiles with strange men."

This brought Sonia from her trance, laughing.

"Say, listen, do I look as green as that?"

"You don't look green at all. Which may or may not be a protection. But I do want you to use your head, Sonia. You have one . . . I really predict a bright future for you."

"Do you, Don? Why?"

"Because, for one reason, you have a cold blooded streak of common sense. Then you are adaptable, learn quickly, and have too much pride to be vulgar."

Color stained her cheeks.

She would be worthy of his confidence. Oh, she would! But she could answer nothing.

"And one thing more! Try to drop some of your rough talk. Not because it's wrong, but because it cheapens you. Your voice is beautiful, Sonia. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"No."

"Well, it is. Very low and sweet, with a husky quality that makes it appealing. When you get to San Francisco, make an effort to use it correctly, will you?"

By all the laws that governed her temperament, Sonia should have resented this. But she was clever enough to realize the value of it. So she accepted it sweetly.

"I'll try, Don."

"That's the girl. Here we are home. Would you like for me to run in and speak to your father?"

"Father won't be at home yet. But I do wish you'd talk with him. There's going to be a regular scene when I mention it."

"I have a dinner engagement tonight. But I might get over about 9. Will that be soon enough?"

"That will be fine. It's awfully good of you."

Sonia jumped from the car and was in the house before he had time to drive on.

"Mother," she cried, "I'm really going to San Francisco. Dr. Stillwater has gotten a place for me in his uncle's real estate office!"

Mrs. Marsh dropped the striped wash silk she was basting.

"Dr. Stillwater? What in the world does he have to do with it?"

"Just about everything. I told him I wanted to go the day I took his mother's dress home. And he wrote his uncle, Jed Thomas, in San Francisco."

"Jed Thomas? Are you sure it was Jed Thomas, Sonia?"

"Why yes. Mother, why do you look like that?"

"Oh, it's only . . . Sonia, you are the limit. You haven't said one word about talking to him before. You never tell me anything. Sonia, get my pin cushion. What will your father say? When will you have to go? . . ."

Sonia was astonished. She had never seen her mother excited before.

Anna Marsh advised her not to say anything to her father until Dr. Stillwater came. It would be better to let them talk it over together. While they were discussing it there was a tap at the door and Sidney Maine came in. Sonia had neither seen nor talked with her since Sidney's party. Sonia was too proud to make any advances, yet she was genuinely glad to see Sidney, of her own accord.

"Hello, old thing! Come on in!"

"Hello yourself!" answered Sidney. "What are you doing? Come on, let's take a walk."

Sonia replaced her hat and they started down the street towards town.

"Coming to the spread tonight?" Sidney asked, kindly.

"Hell, no!"

"Why not?"

"I loathe hen parties," Sonia answered coldly, conscious that her kissing episode had made her most unwelcome in any of the girls' homes.

Sidney, not seeing farther than the opaque green eyes, hesitated.

"Well, I'm sorry," she answered, vaguely.

No use being hurt at Sonia. Poor little nobody! But what gorgeous eyes! Like jewels in her white face.

Sidney sighed, "One can't have everything," she murmured.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean you have the looks and clothes. And some of the rest of us have other things."

Sonia laughed.

"Fathers with fat bank accounts and such?"

"Yes."

"Looks and clothes aren't all I have, darling," confided Sonia.

"I'm going to have adventure, excitement, everything!"

"What are you saying?"

"Going to San Francisco," sang Sonia. "Job in a real estate office—Don Stillwater's uncle."

Sidney stopped short.

"Oh, you lucky girl! I can just picture you in San Francisco. You belong there if ever a girl did. Color, personality . . . I'm so glad."

Her generous pleasure touched Sonia.

"That's sweet of you to say that Sidney. You know I've always been restless here. Haven't seemed to belong and all that. You don't know what it will mean to me to live in a place like San Francisco."

"You'll love it. It's the most wonderful city! I've visited my cousins there lots of times. Perhaps I'll see you there. Wouldn't that be fun?"

"Will you look me up?"

"I surely will. Sonia, this isn't a secret?"

Sonia's first instinct was for silence, but the thought of Sidney telling the girls at the spread that night appealed to her. She would give them something new to talk about.

"Father doesn't know about it yet," she answered. "He won't want me to go. But we're going to have it out with him tonight. Don Stillwater's coming over."

"Don Stillwater!"

Sidney's brown eyes opened wide.

Sonia thought dinner would never end. She pushed her plate away, untouched. A cup of tea, and she was through. She was too excited to eat.

Naturally Sam Marsh noticed it.

"What's the matter tonight, honey? You aren't eating anything."

"Not hungry, Dad. That's all."

"What have you been doing today?" he asked, suspiciously. She lifted a serene face.

"I spent the day with Vera. She wasn't feeling well."

The memory of her day with Vera was already in the dim past. Poor Vera! With her babies and her unappreciative husband! Thank God it was not her!

She could scarcely wait for her father to pick up his paper so that she might start cleaning up. Mrs. Marsh went back to her sewing machine while Sonia cleared the table and washed the dishes. Her mother looked excited, too. Two spots of red burned in her sallow cheeks.

By 8 o'clock the living room was in order. Sonia gathered a huge bunch of red roses for the dining table. She changed her gingham dress for a soft green voile. At 8:30 o'clock the telephone rang. It was Joe Carter.

"Sonia, are you going to the spread tonight?"

"No, I have another engagement. Why?"

"I just thought I'd like to go around there and walk home with you, that's all."

"Well, I'm not going. I'm sorry, Joe."

There was a pause, then he asked, humbly, "Are you still mad at me, Sonia?"

"Mad" at him? She had forgotten that Joe Carter existed. Yet she remembered now she had told him she hated him the week before.

Sonia laughed.

"No, I'm not mad any more."

"Can I come up then some night real soon?"

Some night before she went to San Francisco!

"Yes, Joe. Call me up again."

The sweetness in her voice dripped like honey through the telephone.

"Oh," she thought, "but I can afford to be sweet now."

Her father looked up from his paper, frowning.

"Was that Joe Carter?"

"Yes, Father."

"Well, I don't want to see him hanging around here any more. He's given people enough to talk about where you're concerned."

"Yes, Father."

As if that mattered now!

At 9 o'clock Don Stillwater knocked at the Marsh door. Mrs. Marsh dropped her sewing, but picked it up again. Sonia, her heart in her throat, opened the door. Her father rose, surprised but courteous.

Don spent no time evading the issue.

"I have only half an hour," he said. "I ran away from guests at home. I came to tell you, Mr. Marsh, that my uncle, in San Francisco, has found a place for Sonia in the book-keeping department of his real estate office."

Sonia's father grew old before her eyes. The flesh sagged on his cheeks. His eyes faded.

He turned to his daughter, reproachfully.

"You've gone ahead with your plans in spite of what I said to you, Sonia?"

A lump rose in her throat at his beaten tone. She could have defied his rage. But his trembling lips were like hands clutching at her heart.

"Oh, Dad, it isn't that I don't love you, but I have to get away from this town. I hate it. It's killing me . . ."

"Sonia," Don said, calmly, "suppose you run out in the yard for awhile. I'd like to talk this over with your mother and father."

She was only too glad to obey. Her eyes were stinging with the tears she was too proud to shed.

What Dr. Stillwater told her parents she never knew. Although from her seat on the back porch steps she could hear fragments of their conversation.

"Small town—critical attitude—too much attention," drifted through the summer night.

Once she heard her father's broken voice.

"This kissing business has hurt me, Don. More than it should, I suppose. I know she didn't mean anything."

Thought was suspended as she sat in the dark, waiting. Her whole future seemed to hang on her father's decision. If he didn't let her go now she might never have another chance. . . . A future in Stockton appalled her. She must get away. Freedom to live her own life. . . . Beauty, excitement. . . .

"And I will be careful," she vowed, true to her promise to Don. "I won't do anything bad."

She had been in San Francisco once as a little girl. But she could still remember the long trail of Market Street, with its crowds of people and the bright lights. . . .

"Sonia," called her mother.

She ran in, stumbling, and faced her father. He stretched out his arms to her.

"I think it will kill me, Sonia. But you can go. . . ."

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Later in her bedroom, she criticized him for his sentimentalism. Why need he spoil his sacrifice with tears? It was her mother, thought Sonia, who would miss her the most. Her mother really needed her, yet she had not uttered one word of protest against her going. Perhaps her mother did not love her so much. Sonia wondered. Anna Marsh had gone on sewing just as if nothing had happened.

Sonia took the white silk gown from the drawer where she kept it, and put it on. The creamy lace about her neck made her skin like satin. Her eyes were emeralds.

"Sonia, dancing in a silver gown," she whispered, "with emeralds on her white hands. . . ."

Excitement ran like fire through every vein. San Francisco! The word was magic. It would transform her overnight.

In the midst of her dancing the telephone rang. Without waiting for a kimono she ran down the stairs.

"Yes?"

"Sonia, this is Tom Underwood. I hear you're going to San Francisco."

Tom! She had forgotten her promise to him. But hadn't he known she never could have considered it really?

"Yes, Tom, I'm going. Who told you?"

"Mother was over at Stillwater's for dinner tonight. Don told her."

"I'm sorry. I was going to tell you myself tomorrow."

"Sonia, I want to see you. I've got to talk with you."

"Tomorrow, Tom. It's late now. Everyone is asleep."

As she ran upstairs she heard strange sounds from the front bedroom. She paused, horrified, in the dark to listen, then crept in shame back into her own bed.

Her mother was crying!

CHAPTER VI

SONIA was awake at dawn. She was leaving that night for San Francisco. The days since her father had given his consent had gone by as in a dream, leaving Sonia unconscious of their passing. Mrs. Marsh had dropped all other sewing to work for her daughter. Everything had to be just so. Anna Marsh knew what a girl should have. This once, she said to Sonia's father, Sonia should have the best.

Sonia eyed the results of her mother's effort, hanging in the closet.

Two dark dresses for work, severely plain, but with the lines only an artist can give. A black velvet, with tailored coat to match, and for the first time in her life, a real French hat. A pink chiffon, the one she had worn to Sidney's party, and another dancing dress, blue-green, with tiny silver roses, completed her new wardrobe.

"They are beautiful," breathed Sonia.

The inappropriateness of such a wardrobe for a girl book-keeper did not occur to her. She needed only shoes and a winter coat. Her father had given her a generous check from his savings account, advising her to purchase those things in San Francisco. Vera had donated white silk bloomers to match the nightgown.

"It's almost like a trousseau," Vera said, wistfully.

And only Don Stillwater had offered any advice. Her mother was absorbed in her chores, her father wrapped in grief at the approaching parting, her friends envious or delighted, according to temperament. But Sonia would not forget Don's words, spoken at the moment he had offered her the position, nor the promise she had given him.

Don had gone back to his hospital in the east, but before leaving had come to take Sonia for a farewell ride.

They had gone through the country, talking little. Sonia

was treading the air that day, scarcely conscious of mortal contact.

He said, finally, "I may come to San Francisco to practice when I'm through at the hospital."

Sonia was pleased.

"Will you, really? Wouldn't that be fun?"

He smiled.

"Why?"

"Well, I could see you once in awhile and get more good advice."

"Advice as needed, eh?"

"That would be much more practical. Think how convenient for me to be able to call you up an hour before a date, for detailed instructions."

"So that is all I mean to you? Sort of a father confessor?"

Her green eyes drooped.

"I was given to understand that your interest was purely professional."

Don laughed.

"Well, I'll say this: You've learned your lesson well. If you pick everything up as quickly as you have that, you'll get along."

"Since you're the only man," continued Sonia, coolly, "whose interest in me happens to be of that variety, I may as well make the most of it."

"There you go, sounding so darned sophisticated. Where do you learn remarks like that? You can't have had so much experience. I suppose you read a lot of cheap books?"

"On the contrary, Dr. Don Stillwater, I have had little time for fiction."

"Well, I'm beginning to think you were born with a devil in you which is going to have to come out."

Sonia shrugged and remained silent.

He said, after a moment, "Do you know, Sonia, your silence intrigues me. It takes a wise woman to know when to be silent!"

Her narrow eyes met his coldly.

"What are you trying to do? Flirt with me?"

The insolence of it took his breath. He had stopped the car to see the view at the top of the hill. All at once, with no warning, he seized her hands and kissed her.

Cold tremors ran through Sonia's whole body. She was appalled, angry, humiliated.

"Let me alone—you—" she gasped, furiously. "You're a fine one to give me advice."

Tears stood in her eyes. She had been hurt at his treachery.

"Sonia—I beg your pardon. You're right. I'm a cad. It's unspeakable."

She cried, then, great sobs breaking in her throat.

"I didn't intend to do that, Sonia, never intended such a thing. I only meant to bring you out for a little ride. Sonia, please . . . if you knew how sorry I am."

The sincerity of his voice pierced her sobs. She dried her eyes. But the smile she produced was frozen.

"Sonia, this goes to prove how dangerous you are."

"I wasn't trying to vamp you," she answered, brokenly.

"I know you weren't. And I had no intention of being vamped, either. Shall I take you home?"

Later, when he stopped before her door, he said, "Sonia, I'd give anything in the world if this hadn't happened."

She answered, quietly, "It's all right. Forget it!"

"Will you try to do that, too? And remember the nicer things?"

"Yes, Don. I owe you too much to nurse a grudge against you."

But thinking it over afterward, she found it had quite taken the edge from the previous impression he had made.

As she dressed that last morning, she relieved that exciting moment.

"No, I promised to forget," she said, resolutely.

Besides there were so many other things to think about today. This day of all days! Her trunk to pack, and the bag she would need over night on the boat—a last trip downtown for pins and powder.

"As if," Sonia chuckled to Sidney, "I couldn't buy those in San Francisco."

Sidney was loyal, in spite of her mother's disapproval. Everyone seemed anxious to do anything they could for the departing Sonia. Her prospective absence seemed to cover a multitude of sins.

Joe Carter called. Sonia refused to see him, faithful to the

promise her father had demanded. But she had been unable to avoid a scene with Tom Underwood.

"I want you to know, Sonia," he said, "that any proposal I made to you is all off now. I wouldn't consider being engaged if you go to San Francisco."

"Don't worry, Tom. I never took you seriously. I don't care to marry a man who would ask me to wait for him in Stockton while he has four years of freedom."

They parted coldly. So quickly do the emotions cool at 17!

But in the afternoon as Sonia was walking home from her last shopping trip, a car stopped before her. It was Joe Carter, in one of his father's Fords. He opened the door with a determined air, saying, "Get in! I'll take you home."

Sonia was tired, and in a hurry. To refuse would be unreasonable. She had nothing against Joe. . . . The incident of Sidney's party was in the long distant past by now. So she climbed in the coupe, with a grateful smile, dropping her bundles around her.

"Straight home, then, Joe."

"Straight home, hell! We're going some place where we can talk."

Sonia sat up, annoyed and angry.

"Listen here, Joe Carter, I have a lot of things to do. If you make me miss that 6 o'clock boat, I'll never forgive you."

"Pretty violent about it, aren't you, Sonia? Well, rest easy, you aren't going to miss it, so far as I'm concerned. But you certainly are going to come along and listen to what I have to say."

He drove grimly, eyes straight ahead. Sonia's anger cooled into curiosity. So long as she didn't miss the boat she might as well find out what was the matter with Joe.

They rode to the outskirts of the city before he offered any information. Then he stopped the car and folded his arms.

Sonia waited, conscious of the added power which lay in her silence. Her eyes were indifferent.

"Sonia, would you really go away without telling me good-bye?"

"I don't see that my going makes any particular difference to you, Joe."

"You know damned well it makes a difference. And you

promised over the telephone a week ago that you would see me real soon."

"Well, to tell the truth, Father wouldn't stand for having you come to the house again."

"Why? On account of that—at Sidney's?"

Sonia nodded.

"How did he know about it?"

"He heard some of the boys talking about it in the store. And, believe me, he certainly raised the roof when he came home."

"Sonia, I've been sorry a thousand times about that night. Honest I have. . . ."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she interrupted, impatiently. "Did you bring me out here to tell me that? I have to get home, I tell you. I have a million things to do."

His face was white.

"Sonia, do you know people are saying your folks are sending you away on account of that night?"

"They are not. They don't dare say such a thing."

"Well, they are . . . and that's not all. There's been a lot more added to it. You may be sure the story hasn't lost anything by repetition."

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Sonia shrugged. But behind her indifferent attitude lay intense annoyance. That people should dare to lie about her reason for going away!

"What do you suggest doing about it?" she asked, coldly.

"You know . . . I suppose you'll refuse . . . but the least I can do is to offer to marry you."

Sonia's laughter rang upon the summer air. It was unfeigned and joyous. And it infuriated the boy at her side.

"Oh, you will laugh at me! But you weren't too proud to kiss me last week."

Holding her with a grip of iron, he kissed her. Lips, cheeks, eyes, hair—until, suddenly, the girl went limp in his arms.

"Joe," she asked, faintly, "do you love me as much as that?"

"Yes, and a whole lot more."

Her arms stole around his neck, and her lips met his of their own accord. Sonia neither understood nor questioned her action. It seemed necessary then, held close in his arms.

Joe's expression was that of one suddenly redeemed from the ever-lasting fires.

"Sonia," he said, presently, "does this mean that you love me, too?"

She withdrew herself from his embrace and answered, gently, "I'm afraid not, Joe."

"Well, you're the queerest girl I ever saw. What does it mean, then?"

She said, regretfully, "I'm afraid it just meant we shouldn't have been interrupted the night you first kissed me."

It took him only a few moments to take her home after that. Sonia, loathing deceit, permitted him to drive her up to her own door, although she fully expected her father to come out and order Joe from the place. But Sam Marsh did not appear, and Joe drove away, his face contorted in a frown of resentment. Sonia was really hurt.

"I don't see why he should insist on taking it seriously," she thought.

The memory of her own conduct was not reassuring. She had kissed Joe again, after all that had been said, and all she had promised.

"But I will be awfully careful when I get to San Francisco," she resolved. "Everything will be so different there. Joe is just one of the boys I've known all my life. I'll be awfully careful."

As she went through the living room she found her mother putting the last touches on the green chiffon.

"Joe Carter brought me home," Sonia ventured. "Where's Father? Did he come home early? He said he would."

"In your room, strapping your trunk," muttered her mother, with a mouth full of pins. "Sonia, my pin cushion."

"Thank heaven, I'll not hear that any more," thought Sonia, on her knees searching for it.

When she opened her bedroom door she came upon her father crying over an old red hood which had tumbled from a drawer.

"Sonia, it seems only yesterday you wore it. . . ."

Two hours later, a buzz of voices as the boat pushed from the slip, Tom Underwood standing by Sidney, her father and mother, a last glimpse of those suddenly dear faces, something beating like a tom-tom in Sonia's breast. . . .

CHAPTER VII

THE boat from Stockton to San Francisco carried one passenger who did not close her eyes. Wrapped in waking dreams, excited by visions of a hazy but glorious future, Sonia passed the night. Yet when she rose to dress the next morning the eyes that met hers in the mirror were clear and unwearied.

Miss the sensations of her first night on a boat? Her first night away from home? Her first taste of freedom? Not Sonia, who gloated on each new experience life had to offer.

"I'm 17," she whispered. "All my life's ahead of me."

She was first on the deck to watch the gallant skyline loom from the fog. Graceful, mysterious, like fairy castles, distant outlines were traced above the mist. At sight of the tower of the Ferry Building, brooding, welcoming, the girl's eyes filled with tears.

She was alone, approaching a strange city. Yet, unconscious of loneliness, it was the beauty of the tower which had brought tears.

As she was carried along with the crowd out into the street, impressions ceased to register. She became an automaton, a puppet pulled by strings.

Her instructions to go to the Y. W. were not to be ignored. But she took the room they gave her with mental reservations. She had no intention of remaining here for long. "Until you get your bearings," Don had said. Just now she was grateful for the immediate shelter.

At precisely 11 o'clock she was entering the offices of the Thomas Real Estate Co., asking in rather a subdued voice for "Mr. Thomas, please!"

She was directed to an inner office. After waiting almost an hour she was received.

Jed Thomas was not unkind, but the interview left Sonia

chilled. An atmosphere of dignified frigidity was preserved throughout.

Thomas asked a question or two about her mother and father, admitted, decorously, the reply he had made to his nephew's request for a position for her; believed there was, indeed, an opening in the bookkeeping department. If Miss Marsh wished to ask any questions, Miss LaRue, who was head of that department, would be glad to answer them.

He pressed a button.

"Miss LaRue, this is Miss Sonia Marsh. You take care of her, will you?"

A forced smile and the interview was at an end.

Sonia, walking in panic behind her conductor, was conscious of cold scrutiny from various eyes, eyes which stared impersonally from desks and typewriters. The atmosphere seemed weighted with ominous forebodings. She would have liked to scream. Instead she followed, stiffly, in Miss LaRue's high heeled footsteps, behind the typewriters, up the stairs and into a balcony filled, it seemed to Sonia, with girls.

Maxine LaRue was 10 years older than Sonia, but she was far from showing it. Sonia was tremendously impressed that first day by her authority, which went so strangely with the knot of blond hair and soft blue eyes. She was kind, too. Her instructions were firm but she good naturedly explained anything the girls did not understand. Sonia found, in spite of her boasted skill, that there was a vast difference between training and practical application. She was annoyed by the curious stares the other girls gave her. But she held her head high and made no bids for anyone's favor.

At 1 o'clock, disdaining to ask for information, she wandered up Sutter Street until she found a restaurant. But her hands trembled as she lifted her glass of milk.

"So this was San Francisco . . ." A hard stool in a corner of a crowded balcony with strange girls whose eyes were unkind.

Sonia closed her mouth grimly.

"You wanted to come. This is only the first day. What did you expect? A band at the boat to welcome you?"

Leaving her sandwich untasted, she paid her check and strolled, aloof to the point of insolence, down Sutter Street, into the office and back to her place.

By 4 o'clock her head was throbbing. Figures tumbled like clowns in a circus through her bewildered brain. Maxine LaRue, seeing her white face, suggested that she run to the dressing room and lie down for a few minutes.

"It's awfully confusing at first. But you'll be surprised how quickly it all straightens out," she added.

Sonia smiled her gratitude and took the suggestion. Only she did not lie down. To have done that would have been like flying the white flag. She powdered her nose, roughed her lips and lighted a cigaret. Standing before the flyspecked mirror, she smoked, without touching the cigaret with her fingers, letting it dangle loosely from her lips.

Ten minutes later she was back on the balcony.

At 5 o'clock, when she put on her hat to fly to the protection of her four walls, she had not been addressed by one person except Maxine LaRue.

In bed, without food, an atom in a sea of humanity, traffic roaring outside her window, Sonia closed her eyes.

Pictures came to her, events of the two weeks since her graduation. Joe's kiss in the dark at Sidney's party. Tom Underwood's proposal, which she had retracted the day she came away. The delicate flavor of her conversation with Don Stillwater in his mother's shaded library. Then the day she had spent working for her sister. Poor Vera, who had insisted that Sonia could not understand marriage. "And may the day never come," prayed Sonia, "when I can understand one like hers."

She had met Don Stillwater that same day with news of the letter from his uncle. Lying in the noisy darkness, Sonia imagined she could smell again the fragrance of the roses she had gathered for the dining table, could hear her father's "This will kill me, Sonia"; her mother, crying in the night.

They had labored, sacrificed, suffered all the agony of separation that she might come to San Francisco, to this bare little room, that she might lie here longing for the sound of a familiar voice. Suppose she returned to Stockton? She could imagine the light brimming up to her father's faded eyes, her mother's question, and those other critical, amused glances that would accompany her return.

"No!" said Sonia aloud, swallowing the lump that had risen

in her throat. "I wanted to come. Here I am and here I stay!"

Dry eyed she turned to the wall and fell asleep.

The next day it became easier. After that first day at the office she was never again quite the same atom of unimportance. The girls began to recognize her.

"Hello, Sonia!" fell like manna on her homesick ears.

She found that her trick of smoking cigarets without holding them was appreciated fully as much in the San Francisco dressing room as it had been in the high school at home. Her air of independence and self-sufficiency won its own reward. Here was no clinging vine, longing for companionship, but a "regular fellow." Thus were the intangible barriers between them broken down.

Sonia spent her evenings alone, but she found many things to do those first weeks. She started swimming, she spent long hours on Sunday lying around in the sand at the beach. She went to Golden Gate Park for Sunday afternoon concerts. She attended moving picture theaters, gloating over the gorgeous costumes on the screen.

At the end of the first month she had acquired enough skill at her bookkeeping to let her mind wander to other things; she was sorting the people at the office, arranging girls, salesmen, managers; she knew the names of the principal streets and street cars; had located most of the theaters and many of the shops. . . . But in those four weeks no man had spoken to her on any topic but business; no masculine eye had lighted with appreciation at her insolence; no husky voice had pled with her for a kiss.

The dangers of a big city?

"There aren't any," quoth the disillusioned Sonia. "No old maid in a walled garden could be any safer from adventure than I am."

The next day Maxine asked her to a party at her apartment. "Men and red, red wine," she promised, laughingly.

Sonia accepted, with color rising in her cheeks.

Her first party in San Francisco! Should she wear the green chiffon or the pink? She decided on the green as being more sophisticated. She shopped, with part of her father's hard

earned check, for high-heeled silver slippers. There would be dancing, Maxine had said.

She found Maxine's apartment perched on the top of Russian Hill. A climb that made her heart race, then a view of lights in the city below that took her breath. The apartment was only one large room, colorful with chintz and cushions, a Chinese rug and bits of gleaming copper and old brass. Her hostess greeted her. Maxine was dressed in dull blue, that made her blonde hair shine like burnished gold.

Not all the girls in the department were there. Only a chosen few. Violet, with the too-red lips and too easy laughter; a quiet mouse of a girl, called Jinny who could consume more liquor than any man Sonia had ever met; and the two friends, Fern and Frankie, who appeared to have a crush on each other, and whom Sonia, for that reason, ignored.

Two of the men Sonia had seen at the office. One was an investor in the company, a wealthy citizen of Berkeley. Unmarried, Maxine confided, and not far from 40 years old. Walter Henderson.

The other was a salesman, about 25, fair-haired, pale-faced, nondescript. Even before she touched his cold hand Sonia had said to herself, "Albert Donohue. Check!" Maxine called him "Bertie."

The other men were all young, vivacious, well groomed; so much alike that it was difficult for her to remember their names.

The liquor, as Maxine had promised, flowed freely from a bowl on the table. It was Italian wine, not unpleasant to taste. It was a merry evening with much "kidding" and some harmless open petting. They danced to the music of a phonograph.

Sonia found that she was sufficiently popular. Her silver slippers danced in and out with various partners. Most of the men danced well—Bertie, particularly, she was compelled to admit.

"That was a peach of a dance, Miss Marsh. May I come again?"

Sonia nodded and smiled. She was no conversationalist, yet her fascination was deadly enough to win more and more partners.

"Having a good time, little girl?" quizzed Walter Henderson.

She lifted her head to meet his interested yes.

"Yes; why?"

"I wondered. Maxine tells me you're just up from Stockton. Rather lonely for you here, I imagine."

"I am never lonely," flashed Sonia.

"No? What do you do all by yourself?"

"Different things. Everything is new to me. I enjoy the freedom. I am never bored."

She realized that most girls would have taken his question as a lead for the "friendlessness in a big city" line. But not Sonia! And her ruse worked. Before their dance was over he had whispered, "Lonely or not, I'm coming to carry you off some night."

It was almost midnight when Maxine's bell rang and she admitted a large, handsome man. Sonia had never seen him before, but he seemed to be well known to the rest of the party. He was older than most of them, with a distinguished manner, as if he were accustomed to attention.

Maxine introduced him to Sonia as her "Daddy," Mac MacGregor. For a moment Sonia thought he really was her father, then seeing them drink from the same glass and kiss each other, she decided Maxine had meant quite otherwise.

When the party broke up, it was Bertie who insisted on seeing Sonia home: Bertie, who, in the shadow of her respectable home, squeezed her hand and whispered. "I like you. We're going to see lots of each other."

"Not if I can help it," thought Sonia, evading his icy fingers.

"I know class when I see it," continued the fatuous Bertie, warmed by her smile and too much of the red wine. "And when I see it, believe me, I go after it."

"That for you, Bertie," Sonia, safe in her room, snapped her fingers, impatiently.

Her first party was over. And as a result she found herself wishing for the clean masculinity of Joe Carter. Strangely disappointed, she stepped out of the green chiffon, and, yawning, sought her bed.

CHAPTER VIII

SONIA found that the party at Maxine's had completed her initiation.

She was accepted now as one of "the gang," that small inner circle within the bookkeeping department, whose whispers and nods carefully excluded anyone "outside." It made her days more interesting to be invited to lunch with one or more of the girls, to hear a juicy bit of gossip between cigarets in the dressing room. She found the office, stiff with respectability as it apparently was, had its scandals on the inside.

Maxine told her of a salesman who drank, periodically and was away from the office for days at a time. There was one of the officers whose friendliness with his stenographer was a favorite topic for luncheon conversations. The majority of the girls' love affairs, however, were with men outside the office.

Violet had her "sheik," a college youth, who telephoned her every noon. Jinny's engagements were carried on secretly, much to the annoyance of Frankie and Fern, who spent hours trying to draw her out on where she had been the night before.

Maxine had told Sonia that her evenings were all given to Mac MacGregor. Yet, walking one day towards Powell Street, they met Mac and he would have passed them if Maxine had not stopped him.

"Where are you going, Mac?"

"To lunch," he answered, rather gruffly, it seemed to Sonia.

"I suppose you couldn't come with us?" Maxine asked, wistfully.

"Sorry, but I have to meet a fellow."

Maxine's blue eyes clouded.

"I don't see why you're always too busy to go to lunch with me."

"No can do! See you tonight. Bye-bye."

Sonia was amazed.

"I'd kill a man who talked to me like that," she thought, not daring to look at Maxine. She was so embarrassed for her.

Maxine dabbed at her wet eyes and smiled.

"I'm a fool to care, Sonia. But I do. I ought never to give him a date again."

Sonia had been flattered at Maxine's evident preference for her. She was so much younger—younger than any other girl in the department.

"But you don't act young," Maxine said. "You have so much poise. You know, in spite of my being head of this department, I go all to pieces sometimes. Things upset me terribly."

The girls had discovered that Sonia could not be tantalized into a rage. The color might rush to her face when they teased her, but she always took refuge in silence.

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Bertie kept his promise. Several days after Maxine's party he stopped at her table, touching her hand with a clammy forefinger.

"How about a movie tonight?"

"I'm sorry," she answered, sweetly. "I have another engagement."

"You have? Well, tomorrow night then. The week is young and full of evenings. Your acquaintance can't be so heavy yet that they are all taken."

His persistence and her desire not to offend him, since he worked in the same office, caused her to accept.

She did not want to go. She thought of having a headache but that would merely put off the evil day. So, that evening, she dressed without enthusiasm, determined to have it end as quickly as possible.

He met her in the lobby, nodding approvingly.

"You always have good looking shoes. Few girls seem to realize that a sloppy heel ruins the classiest costume."

"Oh, I don't know," Sonia came back, indifferently. "So many men have raved on that subject I think most of us are fairly well shod now. Where do we go?"

They were bound, he explained, for the California. Sitting in the loge, Sonia longed to smoke with him. Bertie lighted

cigaret after cigaret. With his free hand he attempted to find hers. But she folded them tightly in her lap. The contact of his gently insistent shoulder against hers almost spoiled the picture for her.

"What an old maid I'm getting to be," she thought, amused. "And how Don Stillwater wasted his good advice. If I stay here a few more months I won't be able to have a date at all."

"What shall we do now?" inquired Bertie as they walked out of the theater. "Shall we go somewhere and dance?"

The thought of dancing with him nauseated her.

"Oh, not tonight. It's almost 11 o'clock. Let's go over to Maxine's."

"What's the idea?" asked Bertie. "I'm supposed to be having this date with you."

"Oh, well, let's call it a night then and go home."

"My God, you're an agreeable little thing to take around. San Francisco dames have to pull a different line from that, girly. There are too many girls in this town for you to act so uppish."

Sonia had an intense desire to tell him to go and find another one now, but her resolution to stand well at the office forced her to smile and say, "Now, Bertie, don't be so sensitive. What do you want to do?"

"That's better. And since you're so sweet about it, I'll take you to Maxine's."

There was no answer when they rang at Maxine's apartment. Sonia was genuinely disappointed. Maxine might have helped entertain Bertie for the rest of the evening. But as they started down the steps, the door opened enough for Maxine's fluff of blonde hair.

"Who is it? Oh, hello, Sonia and Bertie! Wait until I get something on and you can come in."

She admitted them, clad in a heavy bathrobe.

"It's cold in here. I was just going to bed," she explained.

Even in the dim light Sonia could see she had been crying. She wished then that she had not insisted on Bertie's bringing her. But Bertie was already winding the phonograph.

"Let's dance."

"The machine's broken, Bertie," said Maxine. "I might whistle for you."

Bertie had a better idea.

"Get dressed, Maxine, and we'll go to Gianduja's. I have to dance."

Maxine hesitated while Sonia said, urgently, "Oh, please do come, Maxine."

"All right. Though I don't know what Bertie will do with both of us. It won't take me a minute to dress."

So Sonia was forced to dance again with Bertie, fingers clenched in his moist hand. The evening had its compensations, however. For sitting at her table in the dim light, while Maxine and Bertie were dancing, Sonia saw a man, also alone. He was young, dark and interesting looking. The glance his blue eyes sent Sonia was full of appreciation. And over the smoke of her cigaret she returned it, wistfully.

"Why can't I ever meet a man like that?" she was thinking.

It seemed to her that the charm of his personality swept across the room. When Bertie danced with Maxine again Sonia sent a swift glance to that other table. He was still there. When he met her glance he came across to her.

"Won't you finish this dance with me?"

Wouldn't Bertie be furious? But wouldn't it be worth it? Sonia smiled and was carried off in his arms.

Dim lights, haunting heart-breaking music, blue eyes smiling—smiling—into her. . . . Sonia had danced many dances with many different men but never did music so intrigue her, as on this night at Gianduja's. It crept under her skin. It sent delicious, prickly sensations up and down her spine.

When it was over she sighed. She resented the cruel fate which pushed her back into Bertie's colorless sphere. Also, she realized that some sort of explanation was going to be necessary. But she was mistaken, for when her partner had escorted her to her own table, he said: "Hello, Bertie. Don't you know better than to leave this girl setting all alone?"

Bertie's pale eyes gleamed. But he answered, in a coldly correct voice, "Good evening, Franklin. I didn't know you were acquainted with Sonia yet. She came into the office while you were away."

"We are old friends. Anyone could tell that who watched us dance together.

Sonia was bewildered but, as usual, waited in silence for her cue.

"When did you get back from your vacation, Mr. Crane?" asked Maxine.

More curious than ever, Sonia met his eyes. The smile he sent back was a delicious mixture of delight at her confusion, and admiration of her playing the game. He asked Maxine for the next dance, but from over Bertie's shoulder Sonia's eyes met his constantly. Wrapped in a glamorous sense of adventure, she forgot her dislike for Bertie. She even permitted him to squeeze her hand.

"What does it matter what Bertie does?" she asked herself. "I'm not dancing with him. I'm still over there with Franklin Crane."

When that dance was over Crane left, his eyes sending her mysterious promises as he said "Goodnight."

And now Sonia was treading air again. She drew deep breaths of the heavy fog. She saw the city wrapped in white magic. Romance peeped from each passing taxi. Adventure lurked behind each drawn window shade. She was gay and light as a feather. She felt that the wind could have blown her to the top of the highest buildings.

"Stay all night with me, won't you?" begged Maxine.

She accepted joyously and was almost gracious to the crest-fallen Bertie.

"I've had a wonderful evening," she said, softly.

When he had gone, she faced Maxine, starry-eyed, hungry for information about Franklin Crane. But she was reluctant to ask for it, and Maxine did not seem to understand. She took down her heavy hair and discussed her own affairs.

"I quarreled with Mac tonight, Sonia. I told him if he couldn't take me out occasionally he need not come up here again. I'm tired of cooking for him all the time."

"Can you cook up here?"

"Surely. I have a gas plate behind the screen."

She showed Sonia the mysteries of the tiny cupboard.

"It's a slick place. And the reason I got it was so I could have Mac here when he wanted to come."

"It's beautifully furnished. Where did you get all these things?"

"Oh, I rent it furnished. It's really too much for me to pay, too. Now that Mac and I have quarreled I might as well give it up."

She eyed her companion, tentatively.

"Unless, Sonia—would you care to live with me?"

"I couldn't afford it."

"Yes you could. You can pay me whatever your room has been costing you. And we'll go 50-50 on the food."

"I'd love to if that would be fair."

"Sure it's fair. I make more than you do and your rent would help me out just that much. There's plenty of room for two."

Sonia was delighted. She would move Sunday. It was darling of Maxine.

Not until she had crawled into bed did she find courage to ask, "Who was that Franklin Crane we danced with tonight?"

"Oh, you know. He's the salesman I told you about who gets drunk and stays away for days at a time."

CHAPTER IX

SONIA's sensations on hearing that Franklin Crane was the salesman who "got drunk," were confusing.

"He can't be very dissipated," she told Maxine. "He is entirely too healthy looking."

Maxine replied, yawning, that he wasn't very old yet, and she wished she knew what Mac was doing.

Clearly she was not interested in a discussion of Franklin Crane. So Sonia said goodnight and lay quiet, puzzling it out for herself. Although she had known him only three hours, she was already defending him. Perhaps the things the girls said about him were untrue. How did they know what he was doing when he wasn't at the office? She had good reason to believe, from her own experience in Stockton, that gossip was like a giant snowball, growing bigger as it rolled off the mountain of tongues. Probably half of it was not true. Someone might have seen him drinking some time and put two and two together and made about ten thousand. At any rate, she would not believe anything against him until she knew it herself. Which was admitting a great deal, had Sonia realized it. But she reasoned that she was only being broad-minded and as charitable as she would have liked for people to be to her.

Closing her eyes, she heard again the lilting music at Gianduja's. She snuggled again beneath his chin, wrapped in the warmth of his blue eyes, and dancing, thus fell asleep.

It was glorious to wake the next morning to Maxine's bright draperies instead of the drab walls of her own room, to smell the coffee that her friend was already preparing and, best of all, to know that Franklin Crane belonged in that same office where she had worked for a month. It gave the touch of glamor she had been missing. How fortunate she was to be here with a loyal friend like Maxine and a regular "job" in a big office that held such infinite possibilities for adventure.

Thank heaven, she had not gone home that first week. Even the thought of Stockton annoyed her now. The letters from her father and mother, full of detail concerning town affairs and gossip they thought might interest her, were skimmed through hurriedly.

"Hey, there, Lazy Bones," called Maxine. "Get up and into your clothes."

Sonia looked for him as she went through the office. There was his desk, "Mr. Crane." Funny she hadn't noticed it before. But he was not there. Many of the salesmen were not down yet, however. She gave Bertie a friendly smile. Count on Bertie being there! She went on into the dressing room, praying that some one would mention his return.

But the bookkeeping department had other things on its mind that morning. Frankie and Fern had seen Jinny dancing at Tait's-at-the-Beach with Mac MacGregor.

"What's the idea?" they chortled. "Don't you know when Maxine finds it out your name will be mud?"

Jinny was noncommittal.

"I don't have to ask Maxine when I want to step out. And neither does Mac."

Maxine heard it, of course. She was clever enough to show no resentment to Jinny. Instead she suggested that they lunch together.

"I'm sorry," Jinny said, a trifle too regretfully. "But I have an engagement."

"She only said that to make me jealous," Maxine explained to Sonia over their sandwiches. "I'll bet she eats in the dressing room while we're out. And if she only knew it, that's the reason Mac took her out last night. He knew I'd hear about it. He was with me until 9 o'clock. He must have called her after then."

Sonia admitted the probability of this. Yet Maxine's eyes were darting anxiously up and down Sutter Street as they returned. And when they went to the balcony, Jinny was not there.

"Oh, well," Maxine shrugged.

Her tension showed, however, in her irritability.

On their way through the office, Sonia caught a glimpse of a sleek, dark head, bent over some papers at Franklin

Crane's desk. Her heart skipped a beat at sight of him. He was so virile looking, so essentially masculine. She told herself that he made all the others in the office seem weak, in contrast. All afternoon she expected to look up and see him standing before her. She felt she could not have been mistaken in the promise of his eyes the night before. But the hours passed and he did not come. Maxine's sharp voice discouraged conversation. When Sonia left the office, he was not in.

She was disappointed. She told herself over her tasteless dinner that she must put him out of her mind.

"Perhaps," she thought, a trifle bitterly, "he doesn't care to play around with a girl from the bookkeeping department."

Her position in Stockton had made her sensitive to social inequalities. Franklin Crane seemed a man of much better breeding than Bertie, although Bertie was recognized as one of the company's best salesmen.

She found a letter from Sidney in her box at the Y. W. It was full of the plans of the girls in Sonia's class. Most of them were going to college. Sidney wrote that she was going to Leland Stanford, adding that Tom Davenport was going there, too. Sonia had a fleeting memory of Tom's proposal to her.

Sonia did not envy them. College would seem too tame after her taste of freedom. Her birthday was next week, and she would be 18. She couldn't afford to waste any time in college. Her room seemed smaller than ever, after Maxine's apartment. She would be glad to move Sunday. But she did hope this quarrel with Mac was not going to affect Maxine's disposition.

"Not that I blame her," thought Sonia, loyally. "Jinny certainly was smart about it."

She went through her wardrobe, preparing to pack. She re-read Sidney's letter. She attempted to smoke a cigaret, and threw it away.

"What in the world is the matter with me? I'm as restless as a cat. Oh, damn, I wish I had never met the man, if he's going to make me feel like this!"

In the midst of her musing she was called to the telephone. She raced through the hall. Her heartbeats sounded

in her ears as she cooed, "Yes, this is Sonia Marsh."

"Oh, hello, Sonia! Just wondered what you were doing."

It was Bertie. Cold with disappointment, she made short work of the conversation.

Tears were in her eyes as she slowly re-entered the room she had swept out of a moment before.

"You little fool!" she said to herself disgustedly.

But the next morning, before she had had time to expect him, she looked up to see Franklin Crane.

"The top of the morning to you," he exclaimed joyfully.

In spite of her leaping heart, she managed to remain demure.

"Good morning, Mr. Crane."

"How are you, Sonia? And by the way, where did you pick up such a gorgeous name?"

"My mother gave me that."

"Well, Mother must be some picker. Did you miss me yesterday?"

Sonia's eyes were cool.

"Miss you? Why should I?"

"Because you knew I intended to come straight to you yesterday morning. But I found a customer waiting for me at the office, and it was just one thing after another all day."

Sonia's heart swelled to think she had not misunderstood his signal. But she said nothing. She was determined to be more than usually careful to leave all advances to him.

He continued, "Wasn't that a wonderful dance we had?"

"I enjoyed it a lot," she admitted.

"Will you go dancing with me again, Sonia? Tonight, at the St. Francis?"

Even then her voice did not tremble.

"That will be awfully nice," she replied.

But at his departing smile, rosy clouds enveloped the balcony. Music burst from all the typewriters. The buzzing of the girls' voices was like the murmur of a summer breeze.

"Will you go dancing again with me, tonight, Sonia?" . . . Would she go! Would her silver slippers trip to the music of the gods again! Would she fly with him on gauzy wings of pink chiffon! Would she! Oh . . .

True to her inborn reserve, she said nothing about it to any-

one. The girls had seen him stop at her table, but they had not heard what he had said.

So to Violet's "Come on, old thing! Let's have it. What did he want with you?" she responded, quietly, "Don't get excited. Just a contract he wants me to look up. That's all."

"Oh, it was not!"

Sonia shrugged and went back to her bookkeeping.

When he came for her that night she kept him waiting 10 minutes by her own alarm clock.

"I will not," she swore, passionately, "let him know how I feel."

Her nod of greeting was coolly impersonal. She permitted him to do most of the talking, apparently unconscious of his caressing eyes. But after he had given their order at the St. Francis, and they rose to dance again, all pretense left her.

She had lived all her life just to come this moment into his arms. To be held, lightly but possessively, close to his heart. Green eyes half closed, she danced with him again and again and again. The evening seemed eternal. It would never end. They would dance on forever. And he, no longer smiling, was now as silent as she.

"God, girl, but you can dance!" he said once.

Her gaze met his, faltered, failed. She could not tell him that it was because she had been a part of him—long years before the world began. She could only smile and go on dancing. . . .

While they sat at their table, drinking some ambrosial mixture that was deliciously cold and satisfying, he talked. He spoke of trips he had taken. A year ago he had been in China, with his mother.

"Mother is an invalid," he explained. "She is not well enough to go in for society or club work of any kind, but she does enjoy traveling."

He spoke of their home in Pacific Heights. Evidently his mother was wealthy. He had come for her in a magnificent closed car. But neither his wealth, nor his position as his mother's only son, could spoil Sonia's happiness that night.

Sitting beside him on the way back to the Y. W., she was conscious of nothing but the warmth of his hand over hers. He made no other advances. Did not offer to kiss her.

"I'll see you again soon, Sonia. May I?"

"I'm moving to Maxine's tomorrow," she said.

"You are? Well, that will be fine. Goodnight."

She lay with the hand he had held pressed against her cheek until she fell asleep. . . .

CHAPTER X

SONIA was up early on Sunday, eager to get away to her new home. The thought of being able to live in that atmosphere of color was delightful to her beauty-loving soul. She felt inordinately grateful to Maxine. Stopping at a florist's she bought a bunch of yellow roses to take as a token of her appreciation.

Maxine was heavy-eyed.

"I'm glad you've come," she said, dully. "I'd go crazy with many more weeks like this."

Sonia was arranging her dresses on hangers in the closet.

"Have you heard anything more from Mac?"

"Not a word. And believe me, if he calls me now he can go to. He makes me tired."

"I don't blame you one bit," sympathized Sonia. "There are too many men in the world to stand for being treated badly by any one of them."

The reason for the quarrel was a little vague to her, but she knew it was connected with his refusal to take Maxine to lunch.

"What are we going to do today?" asked Sonia.

"Anything you like. I don't know and don't care."

Secretly Sonia hoped Franklin Crane would call and suggest another engagement, but 12 o'clock came and the telephone was still silent. She imagined Maxine was listening for it, too, straining every nerve.

"Look here," said Sonia, sensibly. "Let's go out to the Chalet at the beach and have our lunch. It isn't expensive and the food is good. I went alone one Sunday. Then we can walk or sit in the sand."

Maxine cast a stealthy glance at the telephone.

"Well, I sort of wanted to stick around for a while . . ."

"Oh, come on! Snap out of it, darling."

So they went to the beach and had lunch at a little table

overlooking the gray, restless ocean. Sky and water were cloaked in summer fog. The wind swept the strand almost clear of pedestrians. But Sonia liked to walk at the edge of the wet sand, taking deep breaths of the salt-laden air.

"This just suits me," she cried, tossing her head back against the wind.

"Well, it doesn't me," complained Maxine. "There's sand in my shoes and the wind goes clear through me. Let's find a place where we can sit down."

They found a spot, partially protected by the stone wall. Burrowing deep into the sand they lay, each absorbed in her own thoughts.

"A girl is a fool to care about any man," Maxine said darkly. "So long as you don't give a damn, you're sitting pretty, but once you let any sentiment slip into it you're gone."

"There's no excitement in it unless you do care to a certain extent," put in Sonia, thinking of Bertie and how much she disliked to be with him.

"Oh, you can like them and all that, but this 'I-love-you-so-much-I-could-die-for-you' is the bunk."

"I think so, too."

"Take everything and give nothin' at all," advised Maxine. "Take it from one who knows, kiddie. You're young yet and can't have had much experience for all you look and talk so wise. When you see a man who makes your heart come up in your throat and cold chills go up and down your spine, run like the devil."

Sonia, as conscious of Franklin Crane as if he had been beside her, said nothing.

"I have had more than one man crazy over me," confided Maxine. "And I've loved one or two of them. But the minute I weakened the least bit, their enthusiasm began to wane. I hate them all," she said, violently. "And, oh, how I hate myself. Life simply isn't worth living."

Her blue eyes were swimming in tears.

To Sonia, pulled by hundreds of different threads to life, her words sounded impossible.

"She can't mean it," she thought. "Just because one man turned her down."

"Cheer up!" she said to Maxine.

"I can't, Sonia. I know it's yellow of me and all that,

but I'd like to walk into those waves and never come back."

Sonia was sympathetic but also a little embarrassed at such an intimate expose of another's feelings.

"If I felt like that I certainly would never tell any one," she told herself. "But then I'd never let myself feel like that."

She tried to talk of other things but Maxine refused to answer. At last Sonia let herself drift, mentally, off to sea. A warm feeling of contentment came over her. She had not yet lost the consciousness of Franklin Crane's arms.

"I'll see you again, soon, Sonia," the waves boomed on the beach.

Perhaps he had called while they were out! Suddenly she wished to go back to the apartment.

"Come on, Maxine. It's time to go home."

"What's the use?"

"There's no use," said Sonia, truthfully, "making an ass of yourself about it."

Maxine rose then and they sought their street car. Sonia was thinking how much happier she would have been alone.

"There you go," she smiled at herself. "Snap out of it yourself."

Arrived at home, Maxine flung herself on the davenport while Sonia wrote home. She explained to her mother that she was living in the apartment of "Miss LaRue, who is 27 and head of our department."

At 4 o'clock the telephone rang. Both girls sprang to answer it, but it was Maxine who snatched the receiver from its hook.

"Hello, yes . . ."

Her lips twisted into a bitter smile as she turned to Sonia.

"It's for you . . ."

Then Sonia, color high in her cheeks, answered "Yes?" And Bertie's suave voice came to her for the second time.

"Oh, hello, Sonia. I just wondered what you were doing."

"I'll kill him if he ever rings up again," Sonia thought, furiously.

Her voice was like ice, but Bertie chose to be insistent.

"I'm coming right up. Be there in about 20 minutes. We'll go for a ride."

"Oh, I can't go," Sonia said, despairingly. "I'm going to be busy."

"All right. I'll take Maxine then."

She turned to Maxine with fire in her green eyes.

"That was the persistent Bertie. He's coming up. And I can't stand to be with him."

Maxine laughed.

"Remember your good advice to me and take a little of it yourself," she admonished, pleasantly. "But for God's sake get him out of here."

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So Sonia and Bertie went riding down the peninsula to Noah's for baked ham. The ham was delicious and had it been anyone in the world but Bertie in the seat beside her Sonia would have enjoyed the ride.

"There is no earthly reason," she told herself, "for the intense dislike I have for him. As if he were walking on my grave. Ugh!"

She cringed when he laid his hand carelessly upon her knee.

They were on their way home, a dot in the long procession of automobiles. The fog was rolling in again, veiling the city in mist. The lights of the cars shone with a nimbus of pale radiance.

But Bertie had no desire to go home.

He parked along the beach, ostensibly to look at the ocean. But the sun was down and most of the cars had gone. Sonia feared he had stopped merely in order to have the use of both hands. She was right. His hand slid over to hers.

"Don't!" she cried, sharply.

"My God, don't tell the whole beach about it," he said, incensed at her tone.

"Leave me alone, then," said Sonia, coldly. "If you touch me I'll get out and go home on the street car."

"Well, you are the limit. Stockton must be a hell of a place to bring a girl up in. Are you really so innocent as all that, mama's baby?"

"Never mind how innocent I am," she said. "I want you to keep your hands off."

"Oh, you want me to?"

"That's what I said."

"I take it that does not apply to all our little boy friends."

"And that does not concern you, Bertie."

"Oh, doesn't it? Listen here young lady, who was it took

you to your first dance in San Francisco. Who were you with when you met Franklin Crane?"

"What does he have to do with it?"

She felt she could not endure to hear Bertie discuss Franklin Crane.

"That's what I want to know," continued Bertie. "Just how much he is going to have to do with it?"

"You haven't any claim on me because you took me out a couple of times."

"I don't pretend to have. So long as you're decent to me you can step high and wide with anyone you like. I know you went to the St. Francis last night."

"What of it, Bertie?" asked Sonia, striving desperately to regain the ground she had lost. "Why shouldn't I go with him or anyone else?"

Bertie gulped. "Sure it's nothing to me. Only you probably don't know what a rotter he is."

"I'd be ashamed," flashed Sonia, "to talk against a man behind his back."

"Well, some one ought to tell you. He has periodic drinking spells and when he does, he has to quit work."

"I suppose," she said scornfully, "that he can hold his job and get away with anything like that."

"That's just it," he said earnestly. "None of the rest of us could. But he can because he's Franklin Crane, whose father was an intimate friend of Jed Thomas, and whose mother is rolling in dollars. He can get by with anything and he has all his life."

The evident truth of his statement infuriated her.

"Take me home," she ordered. "As fast as you can. And if you ever try to repeat scandal like this to me again I'll tell him about it."

He started the car, angrily.

When they were almost home he said, humbly, "Sonia, I only told you for your own good."

"I don't want to hear anything more about it," she said. "And don't ever mention Franklin Crane to me again."

When she entered the apartment she found Maxine clad in black satin. Her eyes were shining.

"Sonia, Mac called me up while you were gone. He's coming right away to spend the evening."

CHAPTER XI

SONIA was surprised at Maxine's news.

"You're going to let Mac come?" she questioned, "after he's made you feel so miserable?"

Maxine flushed.

"Might as well have it out with him."

"But I thought you did."

"Say, are you trying to make me mad? Whose business is it if Mac comes here tonight, mine or yours?"

Sonia knew by the strain, which rang like a taut wire in her voice, that Maxine was near the breaking point.

"Yours, of course," she soothed. "You know it's nothing to me. I was surprised, that's all. But I'm tickled pink if you are. Where do you want me to go?"

Maxine's stormy eyes cleared.

"I was just wondering. Don't think for a minute you're in the way, Sonia. Only you know how it is after we've quarreled and everything; we'll almost have to be alone."

"Surely, I understand that. I might go to a movie only I'm dead tired. Why couldn't I sleep in the bathtub?"

She saw by the other girl's smile that her suggestion was instantly approved, although Maxine asked doubtfully, "Could you go to sleep? How do you mean?"

"Oh, I could pile blankets and pillows in to make it soft. I'm not so tall, and I could sleep on a rock tonight after my ride with Bertie."

By the time the doorbell rang, she was ensconced in the bathtub. Maxine thought it better that Mac should not know of her presence yet. In spite of the cramped position and the low murmur in the other room, Sonia drifted to sleep.

"Tomorrow," she smiled, "is another day. I'm sure to see Franklin Crane."

Maxine was her radiant self at breakfast. Her blue

eyes shone with happiness. Her skin was soft and clear. "She's really pretty," thought Sonia.

Mac was carefully omitted from the conversation by both of them.

Sonia had a dim recollection of having been laughingly pulled from the tub some time near morning, then having dropped, aching, into the depths of dreamless slumber.

When they had finished their hasty breakfast and were seizing hats and pocketbooks, Maxine said, shyly, "Everything's O. K. again, Sonia."

"I'm awfully glad."

"I should think you would be. My disposition was simply fiendish, I know."

"I wonder," Sonia said as they hurried through the hall to the street, "if you don't want me to find another room somewhere—since you wanted a roommate because you'd quarreled with Mac?"

Maxine ran her arm through Sonia's.

"I should say not. You stay right here. I told you I needed the money, and if you don't mind sleeping in the bathtub occasionally—I'll do the same for you. Besides, Mac has promised to take me out oftener."

It was a glorious sunlit world they faced that morning. For some reason Sonia thought of it for weeks later. How they had stood, arm in arm, waiting for their car, full of life and the joy of living, serene, confident.

She had not been at her desk long before she knew by the beating of her heart that Crane was approaching. With an effort she continued jotting down figures. Her eyes when she lifted them to his were clear green pools, unclouded.

"Good morning! Did you miss me yesterday?" Always that absurd little personality he insisted on dragging in. Before she could answer he had continued, laughingly:

"And why should I? Don't say it, Sonia, it sounds so heartless. And I know you did."

She leaned back in her chair.

"You are as conceited and impudent as a 6-year-old boy. But I did miss you."

"There, you see! I thank you for admitting it. I knew you did because a corner of my heart was aching all day. I knew it must be Sonia missing me—"

"No doubt," she scoffed, but with suddenly lowered lids.

"Look at me, Sonia. Do you know what I did?"

"You aren't accountable to me for your time, Mr. Crane."

"But I want you to know I spent the entire day with my mother. We drove over the Bolinas trail and home by the ocean. It's a wonderful ride. We'll take it together some day."

Sonia's heart suffocated her. Could he have the same feeling of intimacy of which she had been conscious since their first meeting? Even before they had danced together!

"I'd love to," she answered, scrawling ridiculous misshapen figures over her blotter.

"I wish I could see you tonight," Crane continued, softly, "but there's a stupid banquet on. How about tomorrow?"

She realized that she should have pleaded an engagement herself. But not even to allure him could she delay seeing him until Wednesday. So she nodded, the tell-tale color creeping into her cheeks.

"Until tomorrow then," he whispered.

Not until he had descended from the balcony did Sonia's vision clear. She was annoyed with her utter lack of sophistication. That she, who prided herself on her coldness should blush like a schoolgirl. Even the memory of those so recent school days brought no smile to her lips. They seemed ages behind her now, as if they belonged to another girl. Violet's laughter roused her.

"I'll say he's some man!"

"Meaning what?" answered Sonia, busily jotting down figures again.

"Look at her girls! Isn't she the perfect little bookkeeper? Not a flutter left in her now."

Sonia shrugged.

"But when he stood beside her, Violet continued, stopping her adding machine, "'Oh, I'd love to Lord Franklin.'"

Sonia could have boxed her ears. But she managed a bored smile, to meet the smiles of the other girls in the department.

"Rave on, darling!" she said, indifferently. "I must be more careful, though," she thought. "I don't want the girls to think there's anything between us, especially not on my part."

Which was typically Sonia!

It was with this intention to deceive the public, represented by the girls in her department, that she stopped her work for the second time to face Walter Henderson. In spite of his announced intention of looking her up, she had not seen him since Maxine's party weeks before.

"I wonder if you remember me?" he said now, speaking pleasantly to the other girls.

Sonia nodded.

"Of course, I do! Walter Henderson, resident of Berkeley, investor in the Thomas Real Estate Co."

"Good for you," he cried, while Violet and Jinny exchanged glances. "I've been on my vacation and I was afraid you'd have entirely forgotten me."

Sonia gave him a swift look.

"I couldn't forget you, when you offered so charmingly to relieve me of my loneliness."

He laughed.

"Don't rub it in. As I remember, you were quite vehement in your denial of any such thing."

"I know, I wasn't very gracious that night."

His face beamed.

"Absence seems to have made the little heart grow fonder. Yes?—"

Sonia's eyes were very kind. She let them rest in his like a subtle caress, but without answering.

"Sonia," he leaned across her desk. "How about dinner and a dance tonight?"

Sonia hesitated.

"There's a stupid banquet on," Franklin Crane had said. Why not save her pride by accepting the invitation of this rather interesting man?

"Oh, I'd love to," she repeated for the second time that day. A snort from Violet. Sonia's face was serene and guileless. "It's awfully nice of you," she added sweetly, "You know I'm living with Maxine?"

His eyes widened at her information. "You are? Since when? Oh, but I thought—"

"I was at the Y. W.?"

"Yes, I don't mean that—" His eyes went to Maxine's well-developed figure and knot of blond hair.

"Maxine told me you were just up from Stockton."

"And what has that to do with it?"

He laughed, amused at her direct challenge.

"A great deal, little Sonia, if you but knew it. Maxine is too old for you."

Sonia was annoyed. "It isn't often I'm accused of being too young," she answered. "It's usually the other way 'round."

"This is no place to discuss it, at any rate," he said, rather brusquely, "and I'll call for you at a quarter to seven tonight."

Viewing his well-tailored shoulders as he turned away, Sonia was pleased with herself. She lifted her eyes to Violet. This rather effectively dispelled any suspicions connecting her with Franklin Crane. Besides, she would be glad to be busy that evening. The thought of an evening alone with Maxine or sleeping in the bathtub again seemed impossible with the vision of tomorrow dancing in her brain.

Toward noon Maxine drifted over to her.

"Walter Henderson make a date?" she whispered, under pretense of examining Sonia's books.

"For tonight," Sonia answered.

Maxine seemed excited about it.

"Atta girl! If you can hook Walter D. Henderson you're going some—he wallows in money of his very own," she emphasized.

"Sonia, dancing in a silver gown with emeralds on her white hand—" Like a flash she remembered her dreams before coming to San Francisco. Strange how cold they left her now. How lifeless they seemed in comparison with dancing tomorrow night with Franklin Crane!

CHAPTER XII

MAXINE assisted at Sonia's toilette with expert hands.

"Wear the pink," she ordered. "Your line with Walter Henderson is the big-eyed unsophisticated."

Sonia laughed.

"That's never my line, Maxine. I couldn't look unsophisticated if I wanted to and anyway I don't want to. He can take me or leave me just as I am.

Nevertheless she wore the pink chiffon, but reluctantly. It had seemed so entirely Franklin Crane's gown.

"I have known Walter Henderson since I was 19," Maxine continued anxiously. "And I know he likes 'em young and inexperienced."

Sonia powdered her thin shoulders with a huge puff. In the mirror she saw her reflection—sleek hair, narrow eyes, scarlet mouth, arm with the puff behind her head, a living model from *Vogue*. She smiled, well pleased.

"I shall be just as I am," she decided.

She thought Walter Henderson's greeting of Maxine a little formal for one who had known her since she was 19. But he was all attention to Sonia. His smooth, well modulated voice carried force with it.

The most desirable table in the room, the most attentive waiter, the choicest food were obtained with the least possible effort. A lift of the eyebrow, a shade of displeasure in his pleasant voice wrought miracles. Sonia liked that. She liked the extra air of deference the waiter wore when serving their cocktails. It was pleasant appearing with a man so sure of himself and the world.

Lights and music reflected the gayety of her mood.

"You seem like a different girl tonight," her host commented. "Much more gracious and amiable."

"Was I so very rude that night of Maxine's party?"

"Not rude. But rather haughty and unattainable. You in-

terested me with your intensely grownup airs, but I like this Sonia better."

She smiled back. "I am more at home now. At first I was so blatantly independent. I couldn't bear for anyone to see how lonely I really was."

"You admit that you were lonely then?"

"Oh, terribly; not for Stockton," she insisted, seeing him smile, "nor for anyone in it, but because I hadn't quite gotten adjusted to San Francisco."

"And what's wrong with your home town?"

"Don't think I'm knocking it," she said quickly. "There was nothing wrong with the town. It was just me. I've never seemed to belong someway. My father and mother were poor, but that wasn't the reason. I always seemed different from the rest. Their ideas and convictions left me unmoved. I have my own ideas of morals and conduct," she said honestly, "and I believe they are different from the average nice girls."

"You aren't trying to imply that you're not a nice girl, Sonia?"

"I'm not sure whether I am or not," she answered, frankly. "Everyone in Stockton thought I was bad. Even the girls who liked me were shocked at me. And their mothers had a way of looking at me—Ugh!"

His keen, intelligent face lighted with interest.

"Tell me about it, Sonia. What are those morals and ideals of conduct you spoke of just now?"

"I don't think I could put them into words. It's more an indefinite feeling about things. That one should be a good sport and play the game, taking his losses," she smiled, "like a gentleman."

"Well, certainly there's nothing so wrong about that. That's the code of any sportsman."

"I know, but I also feel that every girl must live her own life, in her own way, following the lines that seem indicated in her particular case. And I neither understand nor care for all the 'blah' that is shouted about conventions and virtue."

"But, my dear," he reproved, gently, "you feel that way because you are so—will you pardon my using your own word—blatantly young!"

Sonia's eyebrows lifted in disapproval.

"You know it is not until youth goes that we begin to ap-

preciate it, but it's the gift of the Gods, Sonia, and when you've run contrary to a few conventions and gotten bumped, you'll long for the inexperience again."

Later when they had danced many times, he said to her, "Sonia, don't think me a disgusting old crab, but I don't like to see you live with a girl like Maxine."

"What's wrong with Maxine?" snapped Sonia.

"Don't be offended and don't think I'm criticizing her in any sense of the word. It's just that she isn't good for you, that's all."

"Too indefinite," shrugged Sonia.

Color was high on his cheeks now, making him strangely more human and less imposing. Their relationship while dancing lost its distinctiveness. Subtly transformed by the alchemy of Sonia's nearness he had become to her just another man. Unconsciously her voice had assumed its old arrogance. Insolence to the advancing male!

"Sonia," he answered, "I can't say any more. I haven't anything against Maxine, but can't you understand?"

"Understand what? Maxine has been wonderful to me. She is head of my department, and 10 years older than I am. I see no reason why that should prohibit my living with her, particularly when the advantages are all on my side."

"Very well, I shan't say any more."

"If you knew," she said, passionately, "how all my life I've longed for beauty and color. How I've loathed the untidiness of our poor little house, littered with scraps from my mother's dressmaking. How happy it makes me to wake in the morning to harmony knowing that I am free to live my own life. Oh, can't you see?"

"I can, indeed," he replied. "You will proceed to burn your fingers and nothing in the world can stop you. Shall we dance again?"

He held her lightly, easily, smiling down into her face. But Sonia gave no answering smile. She was hurt and a little uneasy.

Why shouldn't she room with Maxine? And what did he mean, burn her fingers?

"At any rate," she said, as they resumed their places at the table, "they are my fingers."

"They are," he agreed, soberly. "And you are privileged to burn them as much as you like."

There was a twinkle in his eyes. "I might even be prevailed upon to help you, Sonia."

But Sonia was angry.

"I think you are wrong about Maxine," she insisted. "And about a great many other things, too—"

"All right; granted! You see I refuse to quarrel."

Something in his light tone hurt. He had not spoken thus earlier in the evening. Something seemed missing in his treatment of her. Was it his respect? Sonia wondered. Perhaps her cavalier remarks had hurt his pride.

"I didn't intend to be cross," she said penitently. "I was going to be sweet to you this evening. Have you forgotten?"

"I couldn't forget." His voice was caressing now, but yet not the same. "I shall never forget the picture you made to-night when we came in. Your eyes flashed like jewels."

Sonia's face lighted. Here was the thing she craved. Admiration praise! She could never have enough of them.

But when he attempted to kiss her goodnight at Maxine's door, she averted her face.

"No!"

"You will not permit me to assist in the scorching of the little fingers?"

Her voice was edged with pain.

"Don't joke about it!"

"I won't. Sonia, please kiss me, just once?"

"I can't. I'm sorry . . ."

The image of Franklin Crane had flashed between them, like a flame, shaming her.

CHAPTER XIII

SONIA was awake early the morning of her engagement with Franklin Crane. She stretched her slender body luxuriously. It was glorious to know that she was young and attractive. To have an evening with the only man who had ever stirred her pulses but 12 hours away. She lay beside Maxine, tingling with excitement.

"Youth was the gift of the gods," Walter Henderson had said. She could believe that today. Not for all the emeralds in the world would she exchange hers. She was free—free—free! Captain of her own soul!

"Each man's fate is bound about his own neck." Where had she read that? But it wasn't true! She was tied by no laws of God or man. She would follow her fate as she desired, choosing according to temperament only the beautiful and exquisite adventures. Nothing low or cheap.

"You have too much pride to be vulgar," Don had said. She liked for men to say things like that. It showed they had been thinking about her. But none of them really understood the real Sonia. Sometimes she didn't herself. Don had come nearest. She wondered about him now, whether he would come to San Francisco. Not that it mattered greatly. Nothing mattered but Franklin Crane. All thoughts led back to him. Blue eyes, sweet, appealing mouth, like a young boy's. His charm intoxicated her.

She could have sung over her bookkeeping. Life was so entrancing. But it was not more than 9 o'clock when she heard Maxine repeating her name. "Sonia Marsh? Yes, indeed—Sonia!" Looking up she saw the smiling, half-tearful face of her father, peering anxiously from the top of the stairs. She ran to him.

"Daddy!"

"My little girl!"

"When did you come? Where's mother?"

"Mother didn't come. But I couldn't wait any longer to see you."

She had dragged him inside from desk to desk.

"This is my father."

The girls greeted him with curiosity, but warmly. He was so evidently just what he was, a shabby, beaten little man, whose one great joy was Sonia.

Seeing him through their eyes brought a lump to Sonia's throat. A great wave of affection swept her, a desire to protect him from the realities of a world that had always been too stern for him.

"Now, Dad, you sit right down here and wait until noon. Or would you rather go out and see the sights?"

"I'll go out and look around, I guess. I'll come back at noon."

Maxine came up to them. Her blue eyes were shining with sympathy. "Sonia, would you like to have the afternoon off? I think I can arrange it for you."

Not until then did Sonia dare put the question that was thundering in her mind.

"Are you staying over tonight, Dad?"

His face beamed.

"Yes. Sid Owens gave me two days off. I thought that was pretty fine of him."

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Sonia's heart sank. Her eyes met Maxine's guiltily. Would she have to break her engagement with Franklin Crane? Or try to sidetrack her father? Maxine might be able to suggest something for him to do without her. His blue eyes were watching her anxiously.

"You hadn't planned to do anything this evening?"

Now was her chance. But she couldn't say it, could not bear to see disappointment cloud his wistful face. Angry at her own weakness and his, in loving her so much, she answered brusquely.

"Certainly not, Dad. Run along. I'll see you this noon."

"It's a damned shame, kiddie," Maxine said when he had gone.

"It doesn't matter," said Sonia. "I'll just have to explain, that's all."

But she had not dreamed that explaining would be so difficult. She went at once to Franklin Crane's desk.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I can't disappoint my father. He's so ridiculously fond of me."

Crane's blue eyes caressed her. She had the feeling of having been kissed publicly.

"It's all right, Sonia. Some other time."

When she came down at noon to meet her father she was horrified to see him standing in the private office of Jed Thomas. She ran to rescue him, white with embarrassment.

"I was just telling Mr. Thomas how much mother and I appreciate the way he's looked after you, Sonia."

Jed Thomas, seated at his desk, met her eyes with his customary irreproachable stare.

"We are glad to have been able to give your daughter an opportunity, Mr. Marsh," he replied tonelessly.

"Well, sir, it's mighty fine of you. We wouldn't have let our girl come just any place to work."

"Dad, please!" cried Sonia.

.

"What in the world possessed you to go in there?" she asked when they were walking up Sutter Street.

"I thought it would be a nice thing to do, Sonia. Why not?"

She dared not tell him that Jed Thomas had not spoken to her since her first day, so she evaded his question by asking about the girls at home.

"I suppose you've heard about Sidney?" he replied.

"Going to Leland Stanford? Yes, she wrote me."

"I didn't mean that. She and Tom Underwood have been hitting it off pretty well since you left. Your mother was telling me last night that she heard Tom had given Sidney a diamond ring."

Sonia smiled. So Sidney had her diamond? The one Tom had so generously offered Sonia if she would wait for him four years.

"That's fine," she said, with unfeigned enthusiasm. "I'm surprised Sidney hasn't told me."

"Maybe she hated to on account of you and Tom being such good friends," he said shrewdly. "You know I'd always hoped

you'd marry Tom, honey. He is a mighty nice boy and would have given you a good home."

Sonia shrugged.

"In Stockton, yes."

They had entered a small restaurant and Sonia gave the order in a low, forceful voice. She was imitating Walter Henderson. Sam Marsh listened proudly.

"You've become a regular city girl, haven't you, Sonia?"

"I think I always was one under my skin. I certainly seem to belong here more than I ever did at home."

What made her say things like that? Things that made moisture gather in the corners of his eyes? She knew it hurt.

"Oh, darling, I don't mean that the way it sounds," she soothed. "You know I was always happy with you and mother."

He brightened instantly.

"Do you remember how you used to run to meet me? I can see you yet, long legs in your plaid stockings flying down the street. You'd scream a block away, 'Daddy, did you bring me anything?'"

"And you never disappointed me. Samples of breakfast food, tiny cakes of soap, or doll ads and candy."

"Those were the happiest days of my life," he sighed.

In the afternoon she took him to the beach. They watched the seals sleeping on the rocks, fed popcorn to the gulls, and sat for a long time in silent companionship looking out to sea. At night she took him to a motion picture theater, something he refused to do at home.

The music enthralled him, but the morals of the leading lady made him uneasy again.

"That story was supposed to happen right here in San Francisco," he worried. "I don't like to think of you being in a place as evil as that. With all that wickedness and drinking going on."

"It's no worse than any other city, Dad."

"But I hate to think of you living in the midst of such things, honey. Of course, I know you'd never do anything wrong, but it makes me nervous about you."

"You needn't be, darling. I can always take care of myself."

Next day at noon she shopped for mother, matching samples

of material Anna had sent, and buying with her own money a neat leather pocketbook.

When her father had said goodbye, she was surprised to find what a vacancy was left in her heart.

Late that same afternoon she was asked to come to the president's office.

"Miss Marsh," Jed Thomas said, colorlessly, "we are raising your salary \$5 a week."

"Oh, thank you!" breathed Sonia.

"I trust," he continued, "that your discretion will keep you from discussing the matter with anyone in your department. That will be all."

CHAPTER XIV

SONIA went back to her desk, singing inwardly with excitement. But silently! She dared not even whisper to Maxine the news of her mysterious raise in salary.

"Jed Thomas is human after all," she told herself; "he was pleased by that little speech of Dad's. And I tried my best to drag poor Dad away. I ought to be ashamed."

The knowledge of her secret brought color to her cheeks and made her eyes shine.

"Five dollars a week will be \$20 more a month," she figured. "I will begin saving for some new clothes."

Her mind was busy with the problem of how many months it would take to save enough for another evening dress. She came back from her mental shopping tour to the sound of Bertie's voice.

"Have you even stopped speaking to me, Sonia?"

"Don't be foolish, Bertie. You know I haven't."

"You certainly whizzed through the office without seeing me just now." His pale eyes shone with reproach. Sonia was penitent.

"I'm sorry. I was just thinking about something else, that's all. This is my busy day, Bertie."

"Every day seems to be busy so far as I'm concerned." He managed to touch her shoulder with one cold hand.

Sonia put down her pencil and leaned back in her chair.

"What's the matter with you, anyway? You look at me like a dying calf every time I come around. I haven't done anything to you that I can think of."

She had chosen her words deliberately, hoping to anger him into leaving her. In spite of her first determination to be kind, the touch of his hand had angered her.

"I can't bear him," she shuddered, mentally.

Bertie's face was livid.

"You'll regret the way you've treated me! You'll see, my

pretty lady! The time will come when you may be glad to accept a favor from even a dying calf."

A shiver of apprehension ran through Sonia's nerves. She should not have antagonized Bertie. She had wanted so badly to maintain at least amicable relations with everyone in the office. But he was always touching her. Then, in spite of her resolutions, she would lose her head and strike out at him.

"Look here, Bertie," she said again in a different tone, "you shouldn't talk like that to me. How can you expect me to like you when you're always getting angry?"

"You try to make me angry, don't you?"

Sonia sparred for time.

"Besides, all the girls here are watching you. It's awfully embarrassing for you to come up here and jump on me like this. What do you suppose they think?"

"You don't care what anyone thinks, do you?"

"Of course, I do! I don't want them to see us quarreling."

"Give me a chance to see you away from here, then."

"But why should I? What can you possibly have to say to me?"

"You were glad enough to go out with me when you first came to San Francisco."

"I'd be glad enough now. But you spend all the time we're together either criticizing me or my friends."

"I said what I did for your own good. And you'll realize it some day."

"I don't need you for a grandmother, Bertie," she said insolently.

The eyes of every girl in the balcony were fastened upon them. Sonia determined to settle Bertie once and for all.

"I'll meet you at Townsend's this noon," she said coldly, "and pay for my own lunch. Understand? If you have anything to say you can do it then. I won't have you coming to my desk bothering me."

He was waiting for her when she reached Townsend's. They sat down at a small table and ordered sandwiches and coffee.

"Now, Bertie," Sonia said sensibly, "I don't want to have you angry with me. You were awfully nice to me when I came and I did appreciate it."

"You did—past tense?"

"I do now. But you can't follow me around quarreling with me. It will get us in bad at the office."

"Who is it you're afraid to have see us? Franklin Crane?"

"I told you before to leave him out of it!" she cried furiously; "he has nothing to do with you and me."

"Oh, hasn't he? But it's on account of him you've refused to go out with me again."

"But it isn't, Bertie. It's because you spoke against him as you did. Behind his back. I don't like gossip."

Bertie's smile was bitter.

"There's no use beating around the bush with me, Sonia. I can read you like a book. I've been crazy about you ever since I met you at Maxine's. And you liked me well enough until you saw Crane. You haven't looked at anyone else since."

The waiter brought their order. Sonia ate silently. She had begun to doubt her ability to calm Bertie. When they had finished, she looked at him stonily.

"So it's to be war from now on?"

His pale eyes glistened. He leaned across the table, saying earnestly, "Not if you'll be reasonable, Sonia. I admit I've been jealous of Crane, but it's because he's made you treat me differently."

"That isn't true, Bertie. My attitude toward you was just the same until you started nagging at me."

"Then will you forgive me and start all over again?"

"I'll be glad to forgive you—" Sonia hesitated at sight of the fire that leaped into his face.

"But that doesn't mean," she added, "that I'll go out with you. I much prefer that we should be friendly when we are thrown together, but I just don't want to accept anything more from you, Bertie."

"Then your forgiveness doesn't mean a damned thing!"

Sonia rose, taking her check with her.

"I was afraid you'd feel that way. But at least you must stay away from my desk during business hours."

"You needn't worry," he sneered, following her, "you won't be annoyed by my presence anywhere."

.

In the street, they separated. Sonia's heart was heavy as

she returned to the office. It was ridiculous to care what Bertie thought or said. But his threats aroused strange fears. A sense of remote disaster loomed over her.

"I mustn't be so silly," she told herself, swinging down Market Street. "Bertie can't possibly hurt me. Pooh! If I worry like this over every man I turn down I'll be a nervous wreck."

As she went through the office she passed Crane's desk and he stopped her.

"Will you stay down for dinner tonight? Just as you are?"

She agreed and went back to her department but without the joy her first engagement with him had brought. Bertie, in some ridiculous fashion, had spoiled it for her.

That night when she and Crane passed through the outer office, Bertie met them at the outer door.

"Nighty-night, Bertie," Franklin called to him.

"Goodnight, Crane," Bertie answered courteously.

His eyes, meeting Sonia's, were baleful.

CHAPTER XV

As THEY left the office and stepped into Sutter Street, Crane smiled.

"Poor Bertie seems to be a little off color."

"I wish," Sonia said, seriously, "that you would be more careful around him."

"What do you mean? Sounds like a mystery."

Her eyes clouded with the sense of foreboding Bertie had succeeded in arousing.

"He doesn't like you."

"Nonsense," laughed her companion.

"But it's true. I'm afraid he'll injure you in some way."

Franklin Crane threw back his head and laughed.

"You silly girl! As if Bertie could hurt anybody. What could he do?"

He stopped, made thoughtful by her downcast face.

"Look here, Sonia, has he been talking against me to you?"

Color flooded her cheeks.

"Please, I'm no tale bearer."

"Of course you're not. But I can see that he has."

They walked, silently, for several blocks.

Then Crane said : "Bertie has always resented my taking time off from the office."

Sonia gasped.

Would he really explain to her the mystery of his prolonged absences?

"As a matter of fact," he continued, quietly, "I have that sort of an arrangement with Jed. He is an old friend of my family, and it is understood I'm to have time off when I want it. What's it to Bertie? I work on a commission basis."

Sonia said nothing. She was waiting, praying that he would explain further.

"I told you that my mother is a semi-invalid. There are days at a time when she needs me desperately. And when she does, I stay at home."

The fact that he had confided in her and the contrast between his simple explanation and the general interpretation of his absence made Sonia cry, "Oh, I'm so sorry."

"I see you've heard another version of it."

"Yes, I have," she faltered.

"I don't give a damn what the rest of the Thomas Real Estate Co. thinks when I'm away. I do not want you to repeat what I have just told you, even to defend me. But I do want you to understand that it is the truth. Do you believe me, Sonia?"

She pressed her fingers lightly over his arm.

"You know I do."

He smiled.

"All right, then that's settled. Come, pretty maiden, let us enter yon portal and refresh ourselves after the weary day."

Sitting across the table from him, Sonia sighed with pleasure at the sense of well being he brought her. It made no difference where they ate when she was with him. Steak and "French fried" were transformed into ambrosia and nectar. He seemed to share her delight. They smiled at each other in complete comradeship.

Lingering over coffee and cigarets, Sonia talked to him more freely than was her custom. She made him see her drab existence as a school girl; her longing for beauty and color. She found that he agreed with her at every point. There was no friction. Their minds seemed in harmony as their bodies had been in dancing.

"I have never known anyone who felt as I do about all these things," Sonia said, shyly.

She felt that for the first time in her life, she had held her soul up in her hand for another to see. The old reservations which she concealed so jealously from all men, she wished to bring proudly into the light for Franklin Crane.

"I suppose people have always told you how different you are from other girls?"

"Of course."

"Well, you are, but it's because you're years ahead of the average. You're not queer, Sonia. But you are so wonderfully yourself. . . . And I like you just as is."

"Then I shan't change, ever," she promised.

When they had left the café and gone in search of his car, he asked when she would have to be home.

"No particular time. Why?"

"Let's take a long ride, shall we?"

Snuggled beside him in his open car, Sonia threw back her head to the wind and stars. It was a clear night in late September. The lights of the city receded like snuffed out candles, blinking into darkness. He had insisted on wrapping a heavy coat of his about her and the rough warmth of it embraced her like his arms.

"I'm getting sentimental," Sonia confessed to herself, "but I don't care."

How wonderful to fly out the same road she had taken on Sunday with Bertie, to know that instead of Bertie's tense shoulder, she was cuddled beside Franklin Crane.

"This makes me happy—happy," she sang.

"Me, too, Sonia. I could ride for hours on a night like this. But I even like to ride in the rain."

She thought she might, too, if it could be with him.

Miles away from the city he stopped the car. Sonia, tingling with his nearness and judging by all past experience, felt, dizzily, that he would kiss her now. She wanted him to kiss her. She ached to be held close in his arms, just once.

But he made no attempt to make love to her.

"Makes my fingers stiff to drive like that. Some ride, young lady!"

She agreed with him, softly. In a moment now he would turn and seize her as Don and Tom had done.

He removed his gloves, flexing his tired muscles, then drew out his watch.

"Golly, do you see what time it is? We'll have to go some to get you back."

"I'm not at the Y. W. now," spoke the daring Sonia.

He laughed but started the car. A sense of disappointment came over her.

"But I wanted him to," she thought. "I didn't want the others to and they did."

A dreadful thought flashed through her mind: "Perhaps I'm not so attractive any more."

The charms that had proved so irresistible in Stockton might not be so potent in San Francisco. For the first time in doubt

of her own lure she sat, quietly. Could he possibly have seen how much she cared?

“Why so silent, Sonia?”

Suddenly her mind cleared. He should never have reason to believe that his lack of caresses made any difference to her. She faced him, smiling. She laughed and sang. And she found him as gay a playmate as she had ever seen. He shouted in response to her wit. He drove the car zigzag across the mountain road, stopping on the very edge to frighten her. And she, heart aching with a sense of her shortcomings, felt only the thrill of facing danger with him.

They reached Maxine's at a quarter to 12.

“Will you come in?” she asked, perfunctorily.

“I will. Don't you think I want to see where you live?”

She led the way to the door, ringing before she tried her key. There was no answer.

“Maxine must have been stepping out tonight,” she explained.

She lighted the glowing orange lamps, bringing out the sheen of the draperies. Chinese brass bowls, filled with flowers, stood before the fireplace. Splashes of color in cushions, prints, and hangings, leaped from the darkness. Overcome with the joy of possession, Sonia stood quite still. The coat he had loaned her, hung, grotesquely, from her shoulders. She flung out her arms, in a grand gesture.

“Isn't this beautiful? Do you blame me for being happy here?”

“Sonia, you darling!”

His arms were about her. His lips quivering against hers.

CHAPTER XVI

STUNNED, she faced him. Unresponsive!

"Sonia, you aren't angry?"

She said nothing, but drew herself lightly from his arms.

"Should I be?"

"Certainly not! Why, look here, you're crying . . ."

"I never cry," she assured him heatedly, dabbing at her wet eyes.

"But you are. Sonia, do you care so much?"

"Certainly not! I don't care at all."

She threw off the heavy coat and held it out to him.

"Here's your coat. What's your hurry?" she asked flippantly.

But he let it fall to the floor, came to her slowly and held her face up between his hands.

"You blessed little liar."

This time she did not resist him.

"You're wonderful . . ."

She raised her face to him now, shaken, dizzy with happiness.

"Oh, I didn't dream it would be like this."

"Don't tell me you've never kissed anyone before."

"Never anyone like you," she answered seriously.

He drew her to him tenderly.

"Sonia, you combine all the witchery of a woman of the world with the charm of a little girl. Where did you get your wisdom?"

"I don't know. Born with it."

Her voice was ragged with emotion. She felt that she could not endure that piercing sweetness a second time.

"I think you'd better go before Maxine comes."

"Cruel Sonia to make me leave now."

She smiled.

"But don't you see? We have years ahead of us. I can let you go tonight."

"Do you love me, Sonia?"

"I love you so much," she answered, "that all my life has been wasted without you."

Alone, she gazed at her mirrored image. A new Sonia beamed from the glass. No cold-blooded model from *Vogue* now, but a girl glowing with joy and the radiance of being loved.

She left her clothes lying in a heap on the floor, stepped into the white gown, and in bed, drew the covers up to her chin. Hugging her memories to her! She had thought he didn't care. Could she doubt the husky, broken quality in his question, "Sonia, do you love me?"

She had been loved by men before, but never like this. This had dignity, reality, without shams or evasions on either side.

Swirling in a golden mist of dreams, she pictured them stepping down the years together. Young and strong, fearless, mated! No one else in the world so fitted her ideal of a man.

When Maxine tiptoed in, Sonia closed her eyes and feigned sleep. Not even Maxine should steal any tiniest fragment of her dream tonight.

She woke at dawn, tingling with realization. No other day in her life would ever be so happy. Now she knew why she had felt so restless in Stockton. She had been only half alive until she met Franklin Crane. But to be any tiny part of him was sheer physical satisfaction. She could be sweet all the rest of her life, never anything but kind even to Bertie. Her thought bounced away from him like a rubber ball. Maxine lay asleep, one heavy blonde braid outside the covers. Sonia watched her curiously. Did she love Mac like that? She remembered Maxine's words of the previous Sunday:

"A girl is a fool to care about any man."

"But that was because she was feeling low," decided Sonia. "I'm not the weak kind, who is afraid to love. I'll take my chances. Why should I hold back and protest girlish reluctance? Sink or swim—in this as in everything else. I love him and I'm not afraid."

"You look like it was Christmas or something," reminded Maxine, opening one eye.

"Perhaps it is, dear. Perhaps it is."

But she guarded her secret jealously. Time enough to tell Maxine.

Sonia did not expect Franklin to be at the office when she arrived. But she longed for the moment when he would come. She knew her green eyes were wise and sweet that morning as they had never been before. She sat straight and proud in her plain dark dress. But she was shivering with expectation. At noon he had not come.

"A customer outside," thought Sonia, the glory of her morning dimmed a little.

She went to lunch with Maxine, listening vaguely to a monologue on where she had been the night before, what the other women had worn, how Mac had said she "had them all skinned" when it came to looks.

"Eyes, hair, figure, 'n everything. . . . Say, Sonia, do you hear what I'm saying?"

"I do! Hair, figure, 'n everything."

"Well, don't look so far away when I'm chatting about my boy friend. I'll think you're in love with somebody."

Sonia laughed in sheer delight at an excuse for the laughter that was surging through every vein.

"Who's in love? Not me! Guess again!"

But her lips were curving in ecstasy at the memory of his excited eyes, his mouth against hers, sweet intoxicating. . . . She walked Sutter Street to the music of an unseen choir, sublime, stately, transcendent. But when she returned to the office he had not come. Down slipped another tiny cloud of glory. His desk remained closed all day, and although she lingered after 5 o'clock, she had no glimpse of him.

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That night, lying, cold and lonely, beside Maxine, she wondered if his mother were ill, he could not telephone.

Next day she waited with a lump in her breast that felt like her petrified heart. He must come. Any moment she would look up to hear his teasing, "Did you miss me yesterday?" By 5 o'clock she had a splitting headache.

"I think I'll fix me something to eat at home," she said to Maxine as they were putting on their hats.

"What's the idea? Stepping tonight?"

"No!"

"Well, come on with me. I'm going to meet Mac at 8

o'clock and go to a movie. You might as well come along."

Too dreary to refuse, Sonia followed. She sat in the darkness on Mac's other side, conscious that he was holding Maxine's hand. The thought of the dignified Mac being sentimental failed to amuse her. Tears came to her eyes. Every other girl in the theater seemed to have some one, some protective male slumping in the seat beside her. And she had no one. . . .

"Am I getting sorry for myself?" she asked scornfully. "I never thought I would come to that. Besides, I have nothing to feel badly about. He explained to me where he is when he is away."

But why didn't he call? Surely there must be some moment when he might slip away from the most exacting of mothers.

When she was back in the apartment and Maxine and Mac had gone for a ride, she went to the telephone. His number was engraved in letters of fire on her mind. She started to take the receiver down, then hesitated. Supposing, when she called, he should be annoyed? The idea of Sonia, who had never pursued any man, telephoning him!

"But I will," she decided fiercely. "I'm going to settle this thing. Perhaps he is ill instead of his mother. The least I can do is to call and find out."

She gave the number in a determined voice, heard the faint buzz of the ring, then a low voice, evidently a servant's. But she flew from the telephone, panic-stricken, without answering. She felt that she could not endure it if he should reply coldly.

Saturday afternoon as she left the office for the third day of his absence, her eyes, crossing to his vacant desk, met Bertie's. The smile he sent her was malignant, almost venomous. Sonia tossed her head and stared back at him. And the insolence of her green eyes must have reached him, for he turned away.

Late that night as she sat reading, but dully conscious of the words, the telephone rang. Her first thought was of Bertie. Her tone was icy.

"Yes?"

"Sonia, I must see you tomorrow."

The voice was Franklin Crane's.

CHAPTER XVII

YEARS rolled from Sonia at sound of that voice. Life came beating up into her tired limbs. She became young again. Her voice sang over the wire.

"Your mother is better?"

"Thank you, yes. About tomorrow, you'll see me?"

"Of course. What shall we do?"

"I'd like to get away for a day. Let's go to the beach somewhere. I'll bring some food."

"Let me," begged Sonia. "You've had so much to think about. I can run out early in the morning and get something."

"That will be fine, dear."

She replaced the receiver, quivering. The past three days were erased from her mind as if they had never been. Like a child who is to be rewarded on the next day for having been very, very good, she climbed into bed and closed her eyes.

In the morning she rose before Maxine was awake and slipped out to the little store at the foot of the hill. She purchased cheese and potted meat for sandwiches, fruit and little cakes. The thought of Sonia shopping like a housewife made her smile.

"Perhaps, some day you may be doing that very thing," she told herself.

It was the nearest she had approached any plan for the future. The web of a girl's first love is too light a gossamer for the heavy threads of reality.

By the time he came she had everything packed in a basket. In picnic mood she had worn old clothes, a heavy sweater and skirt, a crimson tam.

"Hello, schoolgirl!" he called.

"Hello, yourself!"

He carried the basket to the car and they were off.

"For a whole day," he said joyously.

"And you look like you needed it," she sympathized. "Your eyes are so tired. Have you had any sleep at all?"

"Silly Sonia! As if that matters now. With all the hours ahead of us. Let's talk sense, darling. Do you love me this morning?"

"Um!"

"As much as Wednesday?"

"Three time more."

"Atta girl!"

Hilariously he stepped on the gas and the car roared out Geary Street.

"I'm taking you to Pirate's Cove. Do you promise to be good?"

"I make no promises," laughed Sonia, tossing her head.

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The day was perfect. No mental cobwebs could resist the clean sweep of the wind. Sunlight transformed the city into gold and marble. When they had left it behind both were silent until they reached the small road which led into the cove. He helped her down the cliff, around a steep clay wall into fairyland . . . a corner of the world for them alone. Secluded, with only a vast expanse of water to share their secrets.

They threw themselves on the sand, panting with laughter and their swift descent.

Then he put his arms about her, whispering, "I've dreamed of this for three days."

Their kisses were joyous and as clean as the water booming on the beach.

"I love you, Sonia."

"Do you realize that is the first time you've said so?"

"I said it with my eyes the night I saw you at Gianduja's."

"Was that what you were saying? I thought it was, 'Be careful. Don't tell Bertie we haven't been introduced.'"

Her voice was broken and sweet. She had been right, then, about that first night.

"I felt that way about you, too," she admitted. "When I stared across at you I thought I'd give anything in the world to know you."

"And your eyes said, 'Stranger, come hither' . . ."

"And you came."

"I came. I saw. I conquered."

He put his arms about her.

"Didn't I, Sonia?"

She answered him, without words, as he had wished.

Golden hours, fairy-footed, slipped away. Sonia had no idea of the time. They ate sandwiches and figs and peaches, like children, whenever they were hungry. They tore off shoes and waded in the cold surf, shouting at the waves that splashed Sonia's knees and soaked her skirt.

"You'll take cold," he cautioned.

"I never take cold," she retorted plunging in deeper and swaggering like a naughty child.

When they were tired, they buried their feet in the sand and ate more sandwiches.

While she was shaking the sand from her stockings he leaned over and kissed one bare, white foot. The color rushed higher in her already glowing cheeks. But she made no protest.

When they were fully shod, they returned to the shelter of the cove and watched the sun sink into the painted water. A gorgeous, color-streaked pagan ceremonial! Sonia drank in the beauty of it. When it dipped suddenly from sight, the barren grayness of sky and ocean made her shiver. She sought refuge in his arms.

On the way home he leaned over to pinch her cheek.

"Why so quiet?"

"I was just thinking what a wonderful day it has been."

"It was perfect, wasn't it?"

"Oh, yes!"

"I suppose," he said gloomily, "we'll never be quite so happy again."

"Why, Mr. Crane!"

"Sonia, a girl doesn't tell a man she loves him passionately and address him in the next breath like that."

"Franklin, then; I insist on your explaining that very pessimistic remark."

"It isn't pessimistic. It's God's truth. Few things in the world are perfect, Sonia. You ought to know that. And the relations of men and women, or men and darling little girls like you, seem particularly subject to disaster."

She felt as if an icy wind had blown upon her heart.

"You're borrowing trouble. What could happen to us?"

"What couldn't? How much chance, for instance, do we have of duplicating a day like this?"

"I don't see why not," she puzzled.

"A million reasons. Business, my mother, fate . . ."

"Fate," she scoffed, but in bravado. "I take mine in my hands and twist it to suit myself. I'm captain of my own ship."

"No one is that, Sonia. Influences that we never dream of are at work shaping our destiny even before we are born."

"Don't say that," she begged. "It doesn't sound like you. And I don't believe it."

"Believe it or not," he said grimly, "you're apt to find it out one of these days. Let's talk of something pleasant."

But, although she smiled at him, her eyes were clouded with sadness. Her heart ached with a poignant, tragic sweetness. So close is ecstasy to the border of despair.

When he left her at her door, she felt that she might never see him again. A night's separation might put years between them.

"You'll be sure to come to the office tomorrow?"

"Sure I will."

"And you'll come to my desk some time during the day?"

"Will I? You watch me, Sonia. As if I could keep away."

"So that I'll be sure you still love me," she whispered, half-laughingly.

"Never doubt that, Sonia. I'm afraid I'm going to love you too much."

Months afterward she remembered his warning. But now she drew his face down to hers, breathlessly.

"You couldn't do that."

CHAPTER XVIII

SONIA sat at her desk, in the Thomas Real Estate office, like a queen on her throne. She would not have exchanged places with any monarch in the world that morning. Love had budded within her heart. The future had infinite possibilities. What was a crown compared to the white fire of her lover's kiss?

He had promised to come to her desk, so after 9:30 her fingers worked mechanically. Her mind was on the stairs which he would presently climb to her balcony. Not like Juliet's, but in spite of the frigidity of the real estate office, it had become scented and haunted with romance.

Presently came steps, quick and firm. She bent lower over her figures. Then when he had stopped she threw back her head, and saw Walter Henderson. He received the full benefit of the tender, love-lit message in her eyes.

"You look like a million dollars this morning, Sonia."

She smiled, for she really liked this distinguished, older man.

"I feel like a couple of million."

"Any particular reason?"

"Just glad to be alive, that's all."

He lowered his voice.

"Will you have dinner with me again tomorrow night?"

Her eyes narrowed to conceal her precious secret.

"I'm so sorry, but I have an engagement."

At that moment Crane came bounding up the stairs. At sight of Walter Henderson his face reddened. Before Sonia could smile or include him in the conversation he turned to Maxine, inquired about an account, and hurried away.

"The next night, then?" persisted Henderson.

"Oh, no," snapped Sonia, angry with the innocent cause of her lover's disappearance.

Then to the hurt look in his eyes, she replied, "I have to stay home every night this week and sew."

"Oh, that's it? For a moment I thought you were angry."
She had herself in hand now.

"Certainly not, Mr. Henderson. I enjoyed our evening together immensely. Perhaps I can go another time."

.

As the hours passed, her anger with Henderson changed into resentment against Crane. Why should he misunderstand another man's speaking to her? But her heart pleaded for him. Perhaps Henderson's demeanor had been a shade too interested, his low voice the least bit too solicitous. By noon her resentment was only pain. But she went to lunch with Maxine and passed his desk with only a formal nod. He did not come near her again all day.

That night when she was sitting dully alone by the open fire the door bell rang. Maxine was out. She flew to answer it, every nerve tingling. But it was Walter Henderson again. And her disappointment was so evident that he was puzzled.

"Evidently it's the wrong man," he said, without offering to enter. "I happened to be over this way and thought I'd run in a moment. But if you're expecting some one else . . ."

"I'm not," protested Sonia. "I expect to be alone all evening. Come in. I'm as cross as a bear."

"That's an enticing invitation."

He dropped his coat and hat upon a chair. And taking both her hands, asked, "Sonia, you are unhappy about something. Yet just this morning you were sitting on the world."

Tears came to her eyes.

"Life has such a way of jabbing at you in a new spot every time."

He patted her shoulder.

"What a child you are. I'll bet your heart is broken over something that isn't worth a single tear. Did the new dress turn out wrong?"

Sonia remembered that she had told him she was sewing. He sat down beside her on the cushioned davenport, still questioning.

"Won't you tell me?"

"Nothing to tell," lied Sonia.

"Let's have a cigaret, then, and forget all about it."

As she held hers to him for a light he took the slender hand and laid it across his own.

"That little hand should wear diamonds, my dear."

"Emeralds," she corrected.

"To be sure. Emeralds to match your eyes."

She drew her hand away.

"I'm waiting for a light, kind sir."

"You shall have it right now. Let's turn off the lights and smoke in the firelight."

"No," demurred Sonia.

"Why not? The fire means so much more in a dark room."

Realizing the truth of this she permitted him to turn off the dim lamps. The firelight closed about them like an intimate third person, who put both hands in theirs, drawing them closer.

"And so you've dreamed of emeralds on your white hands?"

"How did you know?"

"By the quickness of your response just now. Tell me the rest of your dream, Sonia."

"It seems rather childish," she admitted.

"Tell me anyway."

"Sonia dancing," she faltered, "in a silver gown . . ."

"That wasn't all of it?"

"But it was. Vague like that. Just to be happy and dancing. But that was before I came to San Francisco. I know now that it would take more than a silver gown and emeralds to make me happy."

"Where did you attain all that wisdom, my precious one?"

"You're laughing at me," said Sonia, suspiciously.

"No, I'm not! I'm asking because I'm interested."

"Well, I shan't tell you. I'm no sentimental young person, spilling all her little secrets to an amused big man."

"What a nasty temper you have, Sonia."

"Granted!"

The tone was exactly his own. He laughed.

"What about all those ideas of freedom and so on that you were telling me about before?"

"I'm still in favor of them."

"You believe in living your life your own way?"

"I certainly do."

He put his arm about her.

"Don't pull away from me. Am I absolutely so repulsive to you?"

"You aren't repulsive to me at all." She wriggled away from him. "I just don't want you to."

"But why not? You don't object for any moral reason?"

"No."

"And you admit you like me?"

"I like you awfully well."

"Then why won't you let me put my arm around you?"

How could she explain to him that after Crane's arms, any other embrace was distasteful to her? Impatient with the futility of trying to make herself clear to him, she rose and tossed her cigaret into the fire. He seized her and drew her down again.

"Sonia, it's because you're a good little girl, that's why."

Sonia was annoyed.

"It is not. If I wanted you to I'd let you kiss me in a minute."

"Then I shall kiss you right now."

"No! Please!"

He released her, slowly.

"It beats me how a really experienced girl will profess her innocence and the babies like you will strut around boasting your vaunted knowledge."

"I don't," denied Sonia, perched on the arm of a chair across the room, "boast about anything."

"Oh, yes, you do!" His voice was touched with bitterness. "You told me how everyone in Stockton thought you were bad. You admit that you like me but not so much as a kiss do I get in proof. If you think you're going to make a fool out of me, you're mistaken. I'm not that kind, Sonia."

"I think you're horrid," Sonia said, reproachfully. "I haven't tried to lead you on or pretend anything. I merely accepted your invitation to dance as it was given to me. I didn't know there were any hidden clauses in the contract."

"There were hidden promises in your eyes."

"That's not true," she flared. "If you feel that way about it I certainly will not go out with you again. And you were one man I really respected."

"An old line, my dear. Your game is deeper than I thought. But I'm through."

A really puzzled Sonia sat by the fire when he had gone.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN Maxine returned at midnight she found Sonia on the floor in front of the fireplace.

"What's wrong, old thing?"

"Walter Henderson was just here."

"Honestly?"

"Yes. He's furious with me, Maxine, and so far as I can see I haven't done a thing. Men are queer, aren't they?"

"I'll say they are," her friend agreed, discarding hat and coat, and dropping down beside Sonia.

"I suppose he tried to make love to you and you wouldn't let him?"

"Something like that."

"Well, why didn't you?"

Sonia's eyes opened in surprise.

"I mean it, kiddie. You aren't gunning for a husband, I take it."

"I should say not. No marriage in mine."

"Sonia! When the mere thought of Franklin Crane across the breakfast table sets your pulses flying!"

Maxine continued:

"That's certainly what you've given me to understand. What's the objection then to a man like Walter Henderson?"

"No objection. I just don't happen to love him."

Maxine gave a hard little laugh.

"Love? There isn't such a thing."

Sonia was fearing for a moment, fearing to convict herself if she ran to defend Cupid. Then she said, slyly, "What about Mac?"

"That's not love," Maxine cried, hotly. "It's hell—and take it from me, I know."

"I still reserve the right," Sonia challenged, with something of her old insolence, "to do my loving where I please."

"But why not use your head before it's too late? It's all the

same in the long run. But I know what's the matter with you, Sonia. You're crazy about Franklin Crane."

"I am not."

"Yes you are. But I don't expect you to admit it. You're a fool if you take him on at the expense of a man like Walter Henderson."

"Supposing you were right!" cried Sonia, "Franklin Crane is as wealthy as Walter, if it were only a question of finances."

Maxine's blue eyes were dark with pity.

"Poor babe in the woods. Is that your game? Think again if it is, for Franklin has nothing of his own. Every cent of the money belongs to his mother."

"Well?"

"Well, a fat lot of good that would do you. Mama Crane keeps her eye on Franklin. And don't you ever forget it. No pretty pennies unless he minds his mama. But it's different with Walter. No strings tied to him, anywhere. And aside from that—" emphatically, "he's a gentleman!"

"You seem to know," Sonia thrust, viciously.

"You're right I do. I had my first affair with Walter Henderson. Eight years ago when I was just 19. He got me my position in the Thomas Real Estate Co."

Sonia gasped but Maxine's face was as unemotional as if she were discussing an old novel.

"He was wonderful to me while it lasted. And although I was too green to understand a lot of things, I had a lot of affection for him. Of course, it's all over now. No back kick either. So you needn't worry."

Walter's advice not to live with Maxine returned to the astonished Sonia.

"Of course, he wouldn't want me to live with her," she thought, understanding what he had meant now.

"Your confession is wasted on me," she said to Maxine. "I don't want the warmed-over affection of any man."

"Don't be a fool," Maxine cried, sharply. "I'm not confessing anything. I suppose you think you're the first one with Franklin Crane."

"You leave him out of it!" Sonia cried.

"It's nothing to me what you do. I was telling you for your own good."

"You sound like Bertie. It's funny how everybody has to warn me against Franklin for my own good."

"Well, he's tricky," declared Maxine, positively. "And if you really let yourself care about him, you'll be sorry to your dying day. . . ."

Wasted! Sonia forgot all of it the moment he approached her desk, whispering, teasingly, "Did you miss me yesterday?"

"Not in the least." But she was radiant.

"Well, any time I stand around and wait until Walter Henderson gets through flirting with you. . . ."

"He wasn't flirting. Can't a man speak to me without you getting jealous?"

"Who's jealous? Not me, sweet thing. I'm going to see you tonight."

All through the autumn Sonia was dazzled by the glamor of her first romance. Life did not exist save as it was related to Franklin. She shopped with him in her mind, read stories with him as the gallant hero, swept and dusted the apartment for the moment he would arrive. Even at work, or lunching with the girls, he sat beside her, silently shaping her opinions, coloring her desires. And in all that time his appearance at the office was as regular as her own.

Sonia, thriving on happiness, could feel herself growing sweeter and more reasonable. Love was developing unselfishness in her. She spent no more hours at her mirror, dangling cigarets, or posing like a picture in *Vogue*. She was kinder to the girls at the office. She began to have real affection for Maxine. Her mother wrote asking if she could not arrange to come home for Christmas.

Sonia, loath to leave her lover, asked Crane what his plans for the holiday were. He told her he should have to accompany his mother to Los Angeles.

"That settles it then," cried Sonia. "I'm going home."

She began to be conscious, then, of a secret hunger to see her mother.

At noon she would hurry through her lunch and walk through Chinatown. The color and atmosphere of Christmas shopping was intoxicating. She wished she had more shopping to do, but she had little to buy and very little to spend. She pur-

chased an incense bowl for Vera, Chinese dolls for the children, a tea set for her mother. Sometime, she dreamed, hunting something for Franklin, he would come shopping with her. In spite of Maxine's warning, her probable marriage was shaping itself in her mind. Nothing definite had been said but Franklin was working as never before. What else could it mean? They should worry about his mother's money. Love and pride filled Sonia's heart.

She had seen Walter Henderson only in connection with business. His greetings of her was invariably courteous, but formal. And she had not discussed either of the men again with Maxine.

Her last day at the office, before leaving for the holiday, she was surprised by a second summons to the president's office. She had already received her Christmas gift from the firm. Each girl in the department had been presented with a \$5 bill. Her heart raced as she ran down the stairs. Perhaps he had heard of her affair with Franklin and did not approve of it.

She entered, saying, "Yes, Mr. Thomas?"

He smiled, coldly.

"Miss LaRue tells me you are going home for Christmas."

"Yes, if that is all right."

"It will be quite all right. Will you take my best wishes to your father and mother?"

"Can you imagine that?" Sonia asked Maxine that night as they were dressing.

"I can't. Sure he wasn't trying to start something?"

"That cold-blooded fish? No! For some strange reason he was pleased with Dad for bouncing in on him."

"I don't know," pondered Maxine. "It looks funny to me."

She left the apartment with Mac at 8 o'clock. Sonia, dressed in her black velvet, waited for Franklin. He had explained that a banquet at the Palace would keep him until later than usual, but he would come. Her suitcase was packed. Her packages wrapped in Chinese paper. Everything was ready when the telephone rang.

"Sonia, this is Walter Henderson. I understand you're going home tomorrow?"

"Yes, I am."

"May I see you tonight for just a moment?"

"I'm going to be busy."

"But you're alone now?"

"For a little while. Yes!"

"Then I'm coming right up."

She replaced the receiver, dazed.

What in the world could Walter Henderson want?

CHAPTER XX

HENDERSON arrived on the heels of his telephone call. Sonia opened the door to him, gaily.

"Merry Christmas!"

"The same to you, Sonia. I couldn't bear for you to go home angry with me. Let's kiss and make up."

"I'm not angry," she countered. "You said some very unkind things to me which I failed to understand, but I have not been angry about it."

"Will you forgive me, then?"

His voice was very humble. It was thrilling to hear a man so distinctly of the world, asking her pardon like a schoolboy.

She stretched out her hand.

"Indeed, I will. I should like very much to be friends with you."

Very gently, he lifted her hand and kissed it.

"Sonia, I have brought you a little Christmas gift. If you mean that, you will accept it."

She answered, nervously, "but I must see it first."

"Close your eyes."

Like a child she obeyed. She felt him slip something on her little finger. Looking down she saw an exquisite emerald, flashing from platinum.

"Emeralds on your white hands, Sonia. Your dream has come true."

Dazzled with joy in the sparkling color, she lifted her hand.

"It's beautiful. Oh, I love it," she breathed, sighing, instantly, "but, of course, I can't keep it."

"Why not? There are no strings attached to it, Sonia."

"I'm sure of that. I don't doubt the spirit with which you have offered it but I can't take it, really."

She eyed it, enviously. It was the most perfect jewel she had ever seen.

"It looks as if it had been made for me."

"It has been, dear. Please take it. If you don't I'll think you are still holding the other night against me."

"It isn't that."

"What is it, then?"

Tears of longing were in her eyes.

"I just can't, that's all. It's too expensive."

At that moment the doorbell rang. Sonia snatched the ring from her finger and admitted Franklin Crane. His blue eyes darkened at sight of the other man.

"Good evening, Franklin. I just dropped in to say 'Merry Christmas' to Miss Marsh before she goes home."

"I see," Franklin said, dryly. His glance went to the open velvet box.

"Saying it with jewelry, I take it."

The older man flushed, while Sonia interrupted, "but I am not accepting it, Franklin, much as I'd love to."

"Don't let me stop you. I'll go."

She ran to him, holding him with strong young arms.

"No, you shall not. I won't have things spoiled like this. Mr. Henderson, won't you tell him that I had already refused your gift? Please!"

Walter Henderson replaced the ring in the little box.

"It is quite true, Franklin. Miss Marsh has not done me the honor of accepting the little gift I had prepared for her. Merry Christmas to both. Goodnight!"

When he had gone Sonia stood against the door.

"I think you are terrible!" she accused, but she was trembling. "How could you talk like that to a man like Walter Henderson?"

"He's no different from any other man."

"Well, he is," she defended, hotly. "He is a gentleman and you've insulted him. I'm surprised at you, Franklin. It isn't fair."

His charming face was as black as a thunderstorm.

"Let him keep away from you, then. If he's such a gentleman what does he mean hanging around offering you a platinum ring?"

"He didn't mean anything."

"I suppose not! No doubt he gave one to every bookkeeper in the office!"

"You're ridiculous," she said, coldly. "He gave it to me because I said I loved emeralds."

"Why didn't you take it, then?"

"You ought to know why." Tears sparkled in her green eyes. "Here we are quarreling on my last evening. I can't understand you, Franklin."

He was glowering at her like a wrathful god.

"How do you suppose I feel tearing myself away from an important meeting to find another man that had gotten here first?"

"Don't you talk like that to me!" flashed Sonia. "Who do you think you are, anyway? I've told you the truth about the whole affair. And you are behaving like a silly schoolboy. Now you can believe me or not, just as you please."

He seized his hat.

"All right! I'll go!"

Sick at heart, she watched him go out the door. Was her high romance to crash thus about her? In vulgar squabbling and cheap insinuations? But she would never call him back. Pride had risen, white hot, at his insulting tone. A death blow, thought Sonia, to love.

An hour later she was sitting exactly as he had left her, staring into an empty fireplace, shivering with cold.

The telephone rang but she did not answer it.

What would Christmas mean to her now? How could she endure going back to Stockton with this quarrel between them? How could she smile over the ruins of her first romance? The memory of his face, distorted with suspicion, hurt her far more than his words.

The doorbell rang. She sat, stonily, hoping if it were Franklin he would go away. Nothing could ever be the same again. But it pealed again and again until she was forced to answer it.

He faced her, staring at her white face.

"I'm sorry, Sonia."

"It doesn't matter."

"But, darling, I know it does."

He came in, closing the door behind him. He picked her up as if she were a child and sank down on the davenport.

"Kiss me, Sonia."

"No!"

"That's right. Kiss me again."

"But if you loved me," she protested, weakening, "how could you have doubted me?"

"Dearest unreasonable little sweetheart, if I didn't love you why should I care at all? Both questions are unanswerable. But I'm sorry and because I am, I've come back."

She lay in his arms wondering if any magic could bring that first glamor again.

"Sonia, I suppose after turning down an emerald you're not even interested in my poor little Christmas gift?"

She was all attention.

"What is it? Tell me, please."

"You promise to accept it even if it isn't platinum?"

"Silly," she scoffed. "I'd accept it even if it were."

He drew from his pocket another velvet box, larger than Walter's. Almost apologetically, he placed it in her hands.

"Can't you see why I hate him, Sonia? Offering you a gift like that when I've worked like the devil to even buy you this?"

She tore it open, revealing a small wrist watch, in a white gold case. Her arms were about him, her eyes beaming with smiles.

"But I'd rather have this than all the emeralds in the world!"

"Nonsense. A dozen of them wouldn't pay for that ring."

"That has nothing to do with it," she explained, shyly. "It's because you bought it yourself."

Magic filled the room. Once more enchantment tinged her world. He fastened the watch on her arm, kissing it. Then she presented him with a Chinese cigaret case, which he accepted, with much appreciation.

"Oh, I know you probably have a lot of more expensive ones," she said, wistfully, "but I want you to have something I've given you."

"Sonia, this is the only one I'll use. Truly."

They loved each other so much that night, so achingly much! Even the thought of a few days' separation sickened both of them.

"It will be so long," she complained.

"You'll come back to me just the same, Sonia?"

"What do you mean?"

"Loving me just as much?"

Utterly oblivious of the evening's altercation, she whispered,
"Darling, you know I will."

CHAPTER XXI

STRANGELY familiar were Stockton streets to the home-coming Sonia. She saw things she did not remember having ever seen before; found herself searching eagerly for old landmarks she had not realized she knew; wondered if she looked as changed to those she met as they did to her.

Sam Marsh had begged time off from the grocery to meet her but was obliged to stop on the way back and let her go home alone. In a way, Sonia was glad to have some time first with her mother. Not that she had anything to confide, but she could find out more talking with her for five minutes than in an entire evening with her father. There was a common lack of sentiment between Anna and Sonia. Neither wasted words.

As she ran up the steps and into the living room, its dreary untidiness struck her freshly. She kissed her mother, who dropped her sewing, saying, "Well, Sonia!" in a most unemotional tone. Immediately she began basting again. But Sonia could read her welcome in the flushed cheeks.

"Glad to see me, Mother?"

"Am I? Don't be foolish! Let me look at you. Stand over there."

Sonia stood so that the light from the window fell directly on her face.

"You look different, some way," Anna commented.

"Wouldn't you expect me to?"

"Well, you look smarter. Although that may be your new hat. That dress needs taking in the least bit under the arms. I believe you're thinner."

"A few pounds, perhaps."

"Yes, I'm sure you are. But that's all right so long as you aren't starving yourself."

"Wait until you see me eat. You won't worry about that."

"Are you having a good time?"

She could see her answer in the radiance on Sonia's face.

"I certainly have, but I was lonely at first."

"You have made lots of friends?"

"Yes. I have something to do all the time."

"That's good."

.

Anna leaned farther over her sewing.

"How about Jed Thomas? Was he nice to you?"

Sonia smiled.

"Well, he spoke to me all of three times. Once when I first went to San Francisco, once when I received my raise, and again the day I left."

Her mother's eyes were intent on her neat stitches.

"He didn't pay much attention to you then?"

"Didn't he, though! He never speaks at all to most of them. But Dad deserves all the credit for that."

"What do you mean?"

"When he came up to see me I found him in Mr. Thomas's private office, thanking him for all he had done for his little Sonia!"

She could not understand the look in her mother's eyes.

"That's very like your father, Sonia."

"Isn't it? I was embarrassed to death. Believe me, I hustled him out of there. But the very next day The Frozen One sent for me and gave me my raise. And what do you suppose he wanted with me the day I left?"

"I've no idea."

Sonia imitated the expressionless voice of her employer.

"Will you take my best wishes to your father and mother, Miss Marsh? What's the matter, mother?"

"I stuck my finger."

"Well, you don't realize what a lot that is, coming from him."

"It was very kind of him, I'm sure."

"It was most UNUSUAL," commented Sonia.

Her mother was searching, nervously, about the scraps and materials on the machine.

"What do you want?"

"My pin cushion. Here it is."

She drew forth the disreputable, pinkish ball, which her daughter had always disliked. A queer feeling came over

Sonia. Her mother had not asked her where it was. She had at last become accustomed to finding it for herself.

She walked through to the kitchen. She saw that Anna must have made a desperate effort in honor of her return. The dishes were washed and put away. Everything seemed in unusual order.

"How's Vera?" she asked, wandering back.

"Not very well. She's going to have her baby before long now."

"I suppose so," Sonia said, grimly. "Poor Vera! She ought to leave that husband of hers."

"What are you talking about, Sonia? Paul is a good man."

"If he belonged to me I'd shoot him."

Her mother sighed.

"I only hope you do as well."

"Well, I'd hate to think I wouldn't!" Sonia said scathingly.

"I'm right back where I started from," she thought, surprised. "Arguing before I've been in the house an hour."

Vera came over about noon. She walked heavily and, although it was December, little beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead. She greeted Sonia affectionately.

"Hello, little sister! You look like the big city."

"Do I, really?" Sonia cried, delighted.

"I'll say so. Doesn't she, Mother?"

"She's thinner," Anna replied. "And wears her clothes better."

Their praise pleased Sonia. But now it was not her vanity that craved admiration. She must be beautiful now for Franklin Crane. The thought of him softened her eyes into tenderness. For a moment she felt a mad desire to tell them about him. But when Vera, noticing the wrist watch, cried, "Where did you get that, young lady?" she answered, "One of the men in the office. Isn't it pretty?"

"Which man, Sonia?"

"A salesman. Nothing to get excited over. Several of them were awfully nice to me."

"You've been having a wonderful time, haven't you?" Vera asked, wistfully.

"It's been glorious," Sonia answered. Her face was glowing. "I never knew a girl could be as happy as I've been"

Poor Vera! Her heart ached for her. The thrills were certainly all over for her. Sonia watched her collecting her little brood. Awkward and ungainly. A line of worry was drawn indelibly between her somber eyes.

"You'll be over tonight for the tree?"

"I'll come early," Sonia promised. "Can't I help decorate it?"

"Will you? That would help a lot."

As Sonia was gazing silently after her departing sister, her mother asked, suddenly, "Sonia, have you been a good girl?" She started, then smiled into Anna's anxious eyes.

"You're acting like a real old-fashioned mother today."

"I asked you a question."

Sonia was both embarrassed and annoyed.

"Yes, Mother, I have been a good girl. If by being good you mean strictly virtuous."

Her mother looked shocked.

"I hate questions like that," continued Sonia, her temper rising. "Supposing I hadn't been? Would you expect me to tell you?"

"You never tell me anything."

"I never will if you try to pry things out of me. I think you expect me to go wrong."

The sewing slipped from her mother's lap.

"What do you mean, saying that to me?"

"It's the way you make me feel."

Anna resumed her sewing but tears were bright in her eyes.

"Don't cry, Mother! I don't know what makes me talk that way."

"It hurts, Sonia."

"I know it does. I didn't intend to act this way when I came home."

"You are so queer about your friends."

"I can't tell people things," her daughter said, remorsefully. "But if you really want to know I'll try to describe one of them."

She gave her mother a carefully expurgated account of Walter Henderson.

At Vera's that night, standing on a ladder arranging strings of colored lights, Sonia thought of Franklin. She sent a fly-

ing, secret kiss to him in Los Angeles. If they could have only spent Christmas together. She tried to tell herself there would be others. But the thought brought her no comfort. Next Christmas seemed too far away. She was lost in dreams when the door opened and Tom Underwood ran in.

"Hello, Sonia!"

She found herself genuinely glad to see him. His blue eyes were so honest. He stood at the foot of the ladder to shake hands.

"How's the little city girl?"

"Fine. What's all this I hear about you and Sidney?"

"It's true," he smiled. "Sidney is the best little pal in the world. I can't understand why I didn't see it sooner."

"Aren't you being rather unkind?"

"No! You never gave two cents for me, Sonia. But Sidney does."

"I'm sure she does," Sonia answered, with real sympathy.

"I'm tickled pink for both of you."

There was no slightest tinge of jealousy in her heart.

CHAPTER XXII

THE tree at Vera's on Christmas eve was a huge success. Sonia found herself a little bored with the noisy demonstration of the children. Or, perhaps, it was Paul's capers in whiskers and great coat as Santa. The bells he persisted in shaking jangled upon her nerves.

That he could be so playful and full of spirit, while Vera looked scarcely able to stand, seemed unfair to Sonia. But her family's gratitude for their Chinese gifts touched her, as did their generosity. They had put their money together and bought her a fur. She knew the price of that gift was genuine sacrifice.

"I must be better to them," she thought. "The least I can do is tell them about my good times."

At midnight she walked home, arm-in-arm with her father. His blue eyes were brimming with happiness.

"It's so nice to have you back, honey," he whispered, kissing her goodnight.

Alone in her room she immediately forgot all of them. There was only time then for Franklin Crane. With his wrist watch ticking against her cheek, she fell asleep.

Christmas day Sonia remembered her resolution. She helped her mother with the dinner, which had been neglected the day before that Anna might finish a dress for the minister's wife. Sonia made cranberry jelly, helped stuff the turkey and set the table.

"For once in its life the sewing machine is going to be closed all day," she said, gaily.

All the scraps of material were collected and put out of sight. She hid the pin cushion in a drawer. She decided that no amount of cleaning could make the living room anything but ugly. The drab wallpaper and faded green and brown carpet, were past any rejuvenation.

"Yet mother loves beautiful things, too," she thought, with

a lump in her throat, watching the slim, well-shaped figure bustling about the kitchen.

"I could make a dress," her mother said, nervously, "easier than I can cook this dinner."

Sam, sitting in dissipated abandon at 9 o'clock of a Saturday morning, smiled genially.

"This is something like it, eh, Mother? To have our girl with us again and be able to stay home all day?"

He smoked his pipe and read his weekly religious paper.

"Seems to me you're looking mighty sweet this morning," he said to Sonia.

She kissed the top of his thin hair.

"Don't I always?"

He seized her hand and pulled her around in front of him.

"Where did you get that, Sonia? That's a pretty fine watch, ain't it?"

"Isn't it pretty? One of the salesmen in the office gave it to me."

Instantly he took alarm.

"Pretty expensive present. What kind of a man is this salesman?"

"Now, Daddy, just a nice young man."

"What's his name?"

She told him, feeling the color surge into her cheeks.

"Well, I don't think much of a girl's accepting presents like this from a man unless she's engaged."

"Don't be silly, darling. It doesn't mean anything. All the girls do it."

He regarded her with anxious eyes.

"You aren't engaged, are you Sonia?"

"I should say not!"

"Well, then, Mother, what do you think of it?"

"I don't think it matters much," Anna said, slowly, "so long as she behaves herself."

"Well," he said, proudly, sucking in on his old pipe, "I guess our Sonia does that."

Always they came back to that, Sonia sighed. She wondered why nothing else seemed to really matter.

At noon Vera and her family came. The children dragged

armloads of toys with them. Paul was bright and cheerful in a new tie his wife had given him.

Even Vera seemed less exhausted than she had the day before.

"You sit down in that chair," commanded Sonia. "And don't let me catch you in the kitchen or running after the children. This is to be your day of rest."

So Vera sat by her father in the living room, looking through her mother's magazines, asking constant questions of Sonia.

"Are the girls wearing their dresses awfully short in San Francisco?"

"What movies have you seen?"

"Sonia, did you hear about Sidney?"

Altogether it was a satisfactory family day. Sonia drank deeply of the potion of love they held to her. It was nice to be so interesting and so admired, even if it was a little wearing.

"I haven't had a chance to think of Franklin all day," she thought, washing the dishes at 10 o'clock that night.

She was to leave the next afternoon on the 6 o'clock boat. She had telephoned Sidney that she wished to see her before she left. She was anxious to make it clear to her that their friendship could not be injured by Sidney's love for Tom. She could imagine the other girl holding back her confidence, afraid of hurting Sonia.

"Although she ought to know me better," she told her mother.

Anna and Sam were going to Sunday School. Sonia promised to come in time for the sermon. But she was still in her long gray dressing gown when a knock sounded on the front door.

Holding her negligee together, she ran downstairs. She was wishing for a message of some kind from Franklin. But she opened the unpretentious door of her parents' home to Walter Henderson. She stared at him, at a loss to know what to say.

"Aren't you going to ask me in, Sonia?"

His eyes were grave and Sonia realized that he had not come in a light mood.

She opened the door, saying, slowly, "I can't believe it's you."

"Are you glad to see me?"

"Of course."

He put his hand upon the arm that wore Franklin's Christmas gift.

"Are you alone?"

She nodded.

"Sonia, I can't give you up until you definitely ask me to, I love you. I want you to marry me."

Utter amazement filled her green eyes. She had not dreamed he even considered marriage.

Still holding her arm he drew her closer to him.

"You don't dislike me, do you, dear?"

"I like you awfully well," she answered, sincerely.

"You and Franklin are not engaged, are you, Sonia?"

With little shivers racing up and down her spine, she shook her head.

"I thought the way he acted the other night that you might be. Then I decided I might be mistaken. You simply didn't want him to misunderstand, was that it, Sonia?"

Fearing to betray some tiny ray of her beautiful hidden secret, Sonia replied, cautiously, "I shouldn't want anyone in the office to think I would accept such an expensive present."

"That's what I thought. But, Sonia, you'd accept it as an engagement ring?"

"If I were engaged, that would be different."

He drew the ring from his pocket. Once more she gazed upon the glorious, sparkling jewel. In spite of herself, she gasped a little.

"I can have it reset in a ring for your other finger. It is made for you, Sonia, as you are made for me. You interested me the night I met you at Maxine's; later I was amused at your pretensions of experience. Then—I beg your pardon, dear—I really began to believe you were trying to vamp me. You tried so hard to convince me of your sophistication and you were living with Maxine . . ."

Sonia stiffened. She dared not betray her friend's confidence, yet Maxine's words buzzed in her ear: "I had my first affair with Walter Henderson when I was 19."

He misunderstood her withdrawal.

"Can't you forgive me, Sonia? I was a stupid fool. But I knew instantly when you refused my gift that you were the

real thing. Men can scarcely believe in a girl like you. They are too rare."

"It doesn't matter," Sonia said, coolly, "what you thought of me."

He pulled her closer.

"Does that mean you'll marry me?"

Her eyes were still dazed but there was no hesitation in her answer.

"I can't, Mr. Henderson. It's awfully sweet of you to ask me. But I can't."

CHAPTER XXIII

HER positive refusal did not seem to disconcert Walter Henderson.

"See here, Sonia, let's be sensible about this. I don't have to have an answer today. You should give my proposal at least the same amount of consideration you would a business proposition. That's fair, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is."

"I should like to meet your father and mother. That's my reason for coming down to Stockton. I wanted to see you in your own home."

Sonia lifted her head, proudly. She had no intention of apologizing for these dreary rooms.

"I promised to go to church," she said. "Mother and Dad will be disappointed if I don't come."

He smiled.

"Little did I expect to find my gay Sonia dressing for church!"

She said nothing.

"I was only teasing, dear. Run on to your room and dress while I have a smoke. I'll go to church with you."

"You needn't."

"I should enjoy it, Sonia. I haven't been in a church for years."

When they marched into the little church together, she was glad she had spoken of him to her mother. The singing had begun so she had no opportunity to introduce him to them, but she saw her father peering anxiously over his hymn book. Other eyes wandered, too. Sonia held her head high with all her old arrogance. Let them see the sort of man who came from San Francisco to find her. He was distinguished looking even there; doubly so in Stockton.

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When the service was over he met her father and mother. Sidney, too, came up to greet her friend.

"He's gorgeous," she whispered to Sonia. "But I'm disappointed. I wanted to walk home with you."

Walter refused Anna's invitation to dinner.

"I'm driving on at noon," he explained. "But, Sonia, I shall hope to see you soon in San Francisco."

His eyes were affectionate and kind. Sonia found herself wishing that she might really care for him. Then the image of Franklin seemed to stand beside her, reproachfully. "I didn't mean it, darling," she apologized, silently. Then aloud:

"It was nice of you to look me up, Mr. Henderson. I'm going back to San Francisco this afternoon."

"Shall I telephone you when I return?"

"Yes, do!"

He evidently understood that it would be embarrassing now for her to see him during business hours.

He left Sonia at the door of her home. Inside she found Anna and Sam watching from behind the window curtain.

"A very nice appearing gentleman," was her father's verdict.

"You say he is interested in the company?" asked Anna.

"Yes, he's very wealthy."

"Rather queer for him to stop in Stockton for such a little while."

Sonia said nothing. What a riot of excitement she would cause if she told them that he had come to ask her to marry him.

Immediately after dinner Sidney telephoned.

"Can you come over a minute?"

"I haven't time. But I might meet you halfway."

This suited Sidney. Neither of the girls wished to meet in the other's home. When they met, Sonia wasted no time in preliminaries.

"I understand you and Tom are engaged."

"We are, Sonia. I didn't write because I wanted to tell you myself."

"I think he's a peach," Sonia answered, warmly. "And he'll make you a wonderful husband."

"I have wondered, sometimes," Sidney admitted, shyly, "if Tom ever made love to you. I know he used to like you awfully well."

"Forget it, old thing! I'm too devilish for Tom. He was

always shocked to death at me. And his mother would have fainted at the very idea."

"She's been awfully sweet to me."

"Why wouldn't she be? Well, I'm awfully happy for you, Sidney. Dad told me you had a ring."

Sidney exhibited her diamond.

"Of course," she explained, "we shan't be married until we've both finished school. But that's only three years."

Only three years! It seemed an eternity to the restless Sonia. She wondered what Sidney would say if she could see her wearing Walter's emerald in its exquisite platinum setting.

"Tell me about San Francisco," Sidney begged. "Do you have a wonderful time?"

"I certainly do."

"I knew you'd love it."

"It's my city," admitted Sonia, in a husky voice. "The moment I saw the outline of the buildings against the sky I knew I could never really belong anywhere else."

"Isn't that queer? I feel like that about Stockton. Yet you were born here, too."

They walked together in silence. Then Sidney asked, "Meet lots of men?"

"Some," Sonia confessed. "One or two have been very nice to me."

"That Mr. Henderson seemed lots older."

"He is one of the investors in the company."

"That reminds me, Sonia, do you know a salesman named Franklin Crane?"

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At the sound of that name, the blood rushed into Sonia's face. She gulped an indistinct answer.

"The reason I asked," continued Sidney, serenely, "he's engaged to a cousin of mine."

"Not Franklin Crane?" Sonia cried, sharply.

"Yes. She has a ring. I met him myself once, a long time ago."

The world reeled about Sonia. She heard a voice coming from a great distance.

"You're sure?"

"Of course! They've been engaged for a long time. Gen-

evieve wrote that they were invited to a Christmas house party together in Los Angeles."

The sardonic humor of Sidney's news made Sonia's lips twist into a tortured smile.

"I believe he did say he was going to Los Angeles for Christmas."

"Do you know him very well, Sonia?"

"Just in a business way," lied Sonia, listening to the dull thud of her heart, like clods thrown into an open grave.

"He's quite good-looking," continued Sidney. "And his mother has heaps of money."

"That's what I understand."

"Mrs. Crane is very fond of Genevieve. She is always having her over."

"She would be," thought Sonia, understanding instantly.

She did not hear the rest of their conversation, was not conscious of anything either of them had said. At 4 o'clock she was back in her front yard, sighing with relief as she dragged open the door. It had suddenly become so heavy.

"Why, Sonia," cried her father. "What in the world's the matter?"

She smiled, bleakly.

"Nothing. Why?"

"You look as if you'd seen a ghost, honey. Is anything wrong?"

She threw herself in his arms and burst into tears.

"Sonia! For God's sake! Mother!"

"Don't call Mother," she sobbed.

"Why, honey, I haven't seen you cry like this for years. Tell your old Daddy . . . Don't you want to go back to San Francisco?"

"It isn't that. It isn't anything, really. I'll be all right."

"Because if you don't," promised Sam Marsh, wildly, "you shan't go. I guess your mother and I can take care of our girl, can't we, Mother?"

Anna was staring at her daughter.

"What's the matter, Sonia? What did Sidney tell you?"

Ashamed of her weakness but still trembling from the sickening realization of Sidney's news, Sonia dried her eyes.

"It wasn't anything Sidney said."

"What in the world is it, then? Has it anything to do with that Mr. Henderson?"

"Oh, no! I don't know what's wrong with me. It's just that I've enjoyed being home so much, I guess. You've been so good to me . . ."

"Nonsense," replied her mother. "You're not crying over that. But I suppose we can't expect you to confide in us, Sonia."

As she climbed the stairs to her room, Sonia heard her father ask, anxiously, "You don't suppose she cares because Sidney's engaged to Tom Underwood?"

"There's more to it than that," her mother responded. "The loss of Tom Underwood would never cost Sonia any tears."

CHAPTER XXIV

"If I can only stop thinking until I get away," prayed Sonia, packing her suitcase. In spite of her most determined effort tears would well up in her eyes and roll, coldly, down her cheeks.

Not by any means the least of her sorrow was the fact that Franklin had lied to her. He had not even spent Christmas with his mother, but at a house party with his fiancée.

"If he didn't tell me the truth about that he wouldn't about anything," she decided, facing her unfamiliar image in the cracked mirror.

Her green eyes were washed with tears. Grief had swept like a storm across her features, subtly changing them.

"But I don't care how I look!" she cried, dabbing at her white face. "It makes no difference now."

By the time she had descended the stairs with her suitcase, she had achieved a frozen self-control. But she realized that her attempt to joke with her father was a sickly failure. His eyes were blinking back tears of their own. She was leaving him again, with this inexplicable scene between them. Her mother, ignoring it, spoke of material things.

"If you will send me the goods I can make you another evening dress. That will be better than for you to try to buy it."

"All right. Although I'm not sure that I really need one."

"Why not?" asked Anna, sharply. "You said you did yesterday."

"Well, I do, of course. It's just that I probably shouldn't afford it." Oh, God, to get away!

She endured their kisses, fighting against the lump that rose in her throat.

"Remember, honey," her father whispered, "if you are unhappy you can always come home."

"I know, Daddy."

"Be careful of that fur, Sonia. It ought to look pretty with your dark dresses."

"Yes, Mother."

Not until they turned to leave did she see the tortured expression of Anna's eyes.

But she could not be bothered then with sympathy for anyone else. Bitterness consumed her like a flame. She lay in her narrow berth furious with resentment, cold with fear. How was she to endure the agony of losing him? No experience in life had prepared her to meet this tragedy. She had no philosophy to comfort her. The pangs of disillusion had full sway. They wracked her soft youth without qualms.

When she reached San Francisco in the morning she left her suitcase at the apartment and went at once to work.

Maxine greeted her joyfully.

"I sure am glad to see you, old thing. But what have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"You look like you'd been through the mill."

"Too much Christmas, I guess. Wait and I'll put on more rouge."

The hours dragged, endlessly. Franklin had not returned. The general office atmosphere seemed deadlier than usual. As she was returning from lunch, she almost ran into Jed Thomas.

"I beg your pardon," she stammered.

"Did you enjoy your visit home?"

"Yes, indeed!"

He lingered, although Sonia's foot was on the first step of the balcony staircase.

"I trust," he said, icily, "that you found everyone well?"

"Yes, thank you! Mother and Father were pleased to have you remember them."

There was no flicker of interest in his cold eyes as he nodded and passed on.

"You're a queer one," she thought, drearily.

She had begun to wonder if it would be possible to go on working in this same office where she had previously been so happy.

Sonia had hoped that Maxine would be out with Mac that

night, but to her dismay she heard that she was to spend it at home.

"We've been together every night since you went away," explained Maxine. "The old dear really deserves a night off."

The girls fried eggs and bacon on the gas plate behind the screen.

"To tell the truth," Maxine continued, "Mac has been pretty decent lately."

"It certainly looks that way," Sonia agreed, listlessly. "He's taken you out enough."

"He still won't meet me during the day. But I can't complain about my evenings. It may be because you're here, but I rather think it's because I got independent that time. That's what the dear things need, Sonia. Treat 'em rough and they'll eat out of your hand. But the minute you're sweet to them—bing!"

Sonia, aching with a sense of unbearable loss, wondered if Maxine were not right. She had been amazingly sweet, for the first time in her life to Franklin Crane.

"Sonia," Maxine said, suddenly, "I've decided to tell you all about Mac."

"What more is there to know about him?" questioned Sonia, without interest.

"Quite a little, I believe. You don't happen to know that he's married?"

Sonia's eyes opened wide.

"Oh, no!"

"Well, he is. Don't take that disgusted tone. I didn't know it when I started going with him. You see I met him at a party at Jinny's. His wife was out of town, but I didn't find that out until afterwards. He was awfully sweet to me; asked me out to dance and all that; then the minute she came home he began avoiding me."

"I should think you'd have wanted him to."

"But I didn't understand. Jinny hadn't told me he was married. I sulked and pouted for awhile. Finally I called him up and asked him what was the matter. He came over late that night. You remember the night of my party?"

Sonia remembered the entrance of the tall Mr. MacGregor, with his self-conscious public appearance manner.

"He told me that night he was married."

Maxine passed one hand across her blue eyes.

"It almost killed me, Sonia. I was really crazy about him."

Sonia's own eyes, restless, full of pain, were turned away. In some way this confession of Maxine's was hurting her.

"He kept on coming to the apartment. We had some rare scenes, I can tell you. Then, when I discovered he wouldn't go out places with me I decided not to see him any more at all."

"But he came back?"

"He certainly did. Not until then did he really start caring for me. But Sonia, I think he's in love with me now."

"What do you expect to get out of it?" Sonia asked, frankly. "I shouldn't think you'd want a married man to be in love with you. And why do you want him to take you places? Supposing some one who knew his wife would see you together?"

"That's just it! Let them! I have nothing to lose. I figure if he really cares he'll take a chance on getting caught. But San Francisco is a big place with a lot of different places to go."

"I see," said Sonia. "Although I still don't understand how you can endure the attentions of a man who is living with another woman."

"That doesn't mean anything," Maxine explained, cheerfully. "He hasn't cared anything about her for years. In the meantime he is a new adventure. I can't live, Sonia, without a man lurking in the background. Your, friend, Henderson, did that for me."

Sonia shuddered at her careless reference to the man who had so recently proposed to her.

"It's true, whether you like it or not. I don't love Mac in the old-fashioned, orthodox fashion, but he certainly makes my life more interesting. And, who knows how the adventure shall end?"

"Who, indeed?" thought Sonia, intent on her own disaster and little dreaming of the tragedy hovering over Maxine.

"So that's that," concluded the older girl, gaily. "I've wanted to tell you for a long time, but I wasn't sure just how you'd take it."

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Sonia put her arm around Maxine, warmly. For the first time in her life she had come to have a real affection for a member of her own sex.

"I don't care, dear, if he has a whole harem full of wives."

Maxine's eyes filled with sudden tears.

"Truly, Sonia?"

"Absolutely. I mean it. I'm for you, whatever you do."

"That means a lot to me, darling. I have to have some one to tell things to, even if you are so tight about your own affairs."

"I've nothing to tell."

"Now, Sonia! I have seen you swing from the heights of happiness into the depths of despair. That means only one thing even if you won't admit it. And I'm afraid it's Franklin Crane."

Suddenly Sonia's reticence crumpled. She must bring some one inside the ruins of her shattered romance. Or die with heart-breaking loneliness.

"Maxine," she said, grimly, "Franklin is engaged to another girl."

CHAPTER XXV

INSTANTLY, Maxine was all sympathy.

"Are you sure? How do you know?"

Sonia explained that Crane was engaged to Sidney's cousin.

"She has had a ring for a long time," she concluded. "So it happened even before he met me."

"Gosh, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Sonia cried, sharply. "Pity is one thing I can't stand."

"Why did you tell me, then?"

Stark terror leaped from Sonia's eyes.

"I couldn't go on by myself. But I must face it and decide what to do before he comes back."

"What can you do?" Maxine asked, curiously.

Sonia dropped the dish cloth and began to pace the room.

"Oh, I don't know. But something! I'm not the kind to sit and patiently endure a thing."

"Are you going to tell him you know it?"

"I certainly am. He owes me an explanation. Maxine, he's made love to me."

"I suspected it."

The memory of the thrilling way he had made love clutched like a cruel hand at her throat. She turned to Maxine, desperately.

"Let's get out of here. This room suffocates me. I can't breathe."

She strode the streets like a wild thing. Maxine was forced to run to keep up with her.

"Sonia, darling, don't go so fast."

"Go home, if you want to. I can walk alone."

But this Maxine refused to do. She struggled along loyally until, drenched with wind-swept fog, Sonia turned towards home.

Next morning Sonia was startled by her own face. It was

so sickeningly sad. Her eyes were proofs of sorrow, hiding dark, uncanny secrets. Her mouth was tortured.

"But I'll fix that," declared Sonia, pursing her lips into a bow and rubbing on lipstick. "No use advertising my aches to the whole world."

She was smarter than ever when she arrived at the office. Thin and proud, with red lips and green eyes blazing in white, defiant face. She suspected that Franklin might return and she was right. Promptly at 9:30 he sought her desk.

"Sonia! God, I'm glad to see you!"

She faced him, smiling, gallantly masking the tragedy of her eyes.

"Did you have a good time?"

"Stupid! Never again! When can I see you tonight? As soon as the office closes?"

She nodded. But something in her quiet face made him whisper, "Do you love me as much as ever?"

"I'll tell you tonight."

He caught a hint then of her mood. His blue eyes were troubled as he turned away.

Sonia was surprised to find that his promise of seeing her that evening was comforting. An open break would be better than enduring this torture alone.

"If we do quit he is going to suffer as much as I do," she thought. Then she caught herself, sharply. "But there is no 'if' about it. If he really is engaged, I'm through."

As if it were another Sonia she heard herself joking with the girls in her department. Tossing her head when her eyes met the understanding glance of Maxine. She was already wishing she had not been so weak as to confide in her. It would have been easier today alone. At noon she swallowed a glass of milk. Solid food would have choked her.

"Are you going to see him tonight?" Maxine asked.

"Yes, but don't ask me anything about it. I don't feel that I can stand to discuss it today."

"I won't, old thing. I understand."

The hours crept by. When it was 5 o'clock, she straightened her desk and went to the dressing room. Ten minutes later they left the office together.

He made no attempt to evade the issue.

"Sonia, there is something wrong?"

"There certainly is."

"Well, let's get in the car and ride, so we can talk. Unless you are hungry."

Hungry? Sonia smiled.

"No, I'm not hungry."

They walked in silence to his car. Once out of the traffic, he swept through the streets at a furious pace. Not until they started to ascend Twin Peaks did he ask for her explanation.

"All right. Let's have it."

"Were you really in Los Angeles with your mother?"

His charming mouth tightened into hard lines.

"So that's the trouble? No, Sonia, I must admit that I was not."

Even then her heart gave a thrill of gratitude that he had not lied to her the second time.

"Where were you, then?"

"Sounds like the inquisition. But I suppose you're justified. I was at a house party. A perfectly decent, anaemic house party, with chaperones and everything."

"And the girl you're engaged to?"

He started and threw her a miserable, anxious look.

"Who told you that?"

"It makes no difference where I heard it," she answered in a hard, little voice. "I'm asking you if it's true."

"Yes," he groaned.

Sonia said nothing. She had been sure enough of it but his own admission made it more sickeningly definite.

Presently he said, "Sonia, I owe you an explanation."

"Not at all," she said, proudly. "I want you to take me home."

"Well, I'm not going to."

He stopped the car. The lights of San Francisco snapped like live fire beneath them. But the broad sweep of jeweled streets brought no exclamation from either of them, although Sonia was so conscious of it that she could never see it afterwards without tug of her heart.

"Sonia!" he cried, "I am engaged to Genevieve Erickson. I don't know how you have found it out, but it is true. I would have told you soon, only,—Oh, what's the use my

trying to explain when you are sitting there hating me?"

"Can you blame me?"

"No. I see your point of view. But if you knew what a bloodless arrangement this engagement is."

"You made it, didn't you?"

"I'm not sure that I did," he replied, bitterly. "My mother seems to have had the biggest part in it. Genevieve is a peach of a girl. I might have been able to have married her if I hadn't known you. But I didn't know you when it happened, Sonia."

She still said nothing, taking refuge in one of her disconcerting silences. She realized that she was making it hard for him. He stumbled on.

"I love you, Sonia. I never have loved anyone in my life as I do you. You're like a flame burning up my heart. . . . You're driving me crazy. God, don't you realize what I've been through? The torture of making you love me, knowing that in the end you were bound to know this. . . ."

At his words of love little shivers swept over her. He was suffering. There was no doubt of that. Raw emotion cut through his voice. He fumbled for her hand, blindly, as it through tears.

"Sonia, darling, don't doubt my love for you. I can't stand it. It's the biggest thing in my life."

Her hand quivered in his.

"Kiss me, sweetheart! Tell me in spite of it all you still love me. I admit I have been a cad not to tell you. But it's because I loved you so much. Nothing can make you doubt that."

Her lips sighed into response. It was as if their love leaped forth to satisfy itself in spite of their separate hurt and suspicion.

"You do love me?"

"Oh, you know I do! But what are we going to do?"

"What can we do? I can't break my engagement and go on living at home."

Too desperate to remember her pride, Sonia cried. "But if we were married you wouldn't have to go on at home."

His arms tightened.

"Darling, I don't make enough money to marry now."

"I'm not used to very much."

"No," he said, and his voice sounded strangely practical. "Marriage at this time would be impossible. My mother isn't well. The shock might kill her. She can't force me to marry anyone else but the engagement will have to remain as it is. You don't know my mother, Sonia."

She twisted away from him.

"You mean to say the engagement will go on?"

"It can't do anything else. But I swear I will not marry her."

She looked at him across a new chasm of disillusion.

"You would ask me to go on as if nothing had happened, knowing that every night you were not with me you'd be with her?"

"We have been happy, haven't we?"

The memory of that happiness was an exquisite pain.

"But I didn't know. I didn't dream. . . ."

Suddenly the lights of the city below blurred and were blotted out. She slipped down in the seat beside him.

"I'm ill. You must take me home."

CHAPTER XXVI

ALL through the long drive back to her apartment, Franklin talked. Incoherent, wild promises; desperate, jumbled, murmurs of passion and contrition, which left Sonia cold, because not once did he alter his decision that the engagement to the other girl could not be broken.

Chilled and desolate, she permitted him to kiss her.

"Promise me, Sonia, that this won't be the end?"

"I can't promise anything."

"Sonia, please! You can't be so cruel."

"Cruel," she cried bitterly. "How can you say that?"

She tore herself away from him and fled to the shelter of her own walls. She felt maimed, wounded. She could never dance through life with the old vibrant step, no matter what happened. He had hurt her so that she would never recover. Beyond hope of cure!

Maxine was out. The bizarre tones of the apartment clashed now on her tortured nerves. She was sick of color. Jaded and worn to the point where only somber dullness was desired, she longed for some anaesthesia to deaden all sensation. Better oblivion than the agony of life without Crane.

"How could he do it?" she asked over and over. "How could he expect me to go on? It would be constant torture. I'd never know another peaceful day."

His desperate kisses burned on her lips.

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In the midst of her despair, the telephone rang. Walter Henderson's voice responded, cheerfully matter of fact.

"I've just gotten in. Can I come up, or are you busy to-night?"

"I'm not busy."

"Does that mean you want to see me?"

"Yes. Come on up."

Thought was suspended until he came. She was conscious

of a determined effort at self control, which was successful. She opened the door, smiling, "Welcome home."

"That's sweet of you. I'm glad enough to get here."

He entered, ruddy with the cold, bringing with him the distinguished, polished atmosphere which had always appealed to her. He held her hands.

"Sonia, you look cold. And no wonder. It's like a morgue in here. Why haven't you a fire?"

"I didn't notice there wasn't any," she apologized.

"Well, show me where the coal is. I'll make you one."

His commonplace words were comforting. She sat, shivering, but relaxed, while he prepared an expert arrangement of kindling and coal in the fireplace. The ice about her heart seemed to melt a little with the crackling flames.

"Draw up closer. There! I believe you were half frozen."

She obeyed him, like a child, groping for his hand and holding it in hers, tightly.

"What is it, Sonia?"

She did not reply until he repeated his question, then she said, desperately, "Life terrifies me."

"My dear girl, you are the last person on earth I should ever have expected to say that. I thought you craved experience."

"I'm sick of it."

"Sonia," he asked, quietly, "are you in love with Franklin Crane?"

"NO!"

She flung away from him.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course! I don't love anyone."

He was watching her, intently.

"Does that sweeping assertion also include me?"

"It includes everyone I know," she declared, defiantly.

"Very well! I suppose I'm a fool, but if it really means you don't care for anyone else I'm satisfied."

She looked at him in surprise.

"Because you are too young to know your own mind," he continued. "The man most girls love at 18 is not their choice at 25. And marriage gives wisdom to the most inexperienced."

"You mean I might come to love you?"

"Exactly! Is the idea an obnoxious one?"

"I'm afraid the feeling I have for you would never be love."

"You do have a certain place for me in your affections?"

"I surely do."

"Then I would willingly take a chance. You don't know how sweet I could be to you, Sonia."

She said, slowly, "I don't wish to ever really love anyone."

"All right. Then we could go down to old age with a satisfactory domestic affection on your part. You wouldn't object to my devotion to you?"

Staring at his broad, well-tailored shoulders, Sonia felt that he could never become distasteful to her. He was too well bred to inflict himself upon her when he felt he was unwelcome. She had craved a surcease to suffering, an anaesthetic to deaden her pain. Might she not be able to find it in his home? Surrounded by luxury and the respect due Walter Henderson's wife?

"There would be no thrill to it," she thought, sadly. "But at least there wouldn't be this other wracking torment."

"What are you thinking, Sonia?"

Her green eyes were inscrutable.

"I was wondering if you'd really marry me like that?"

"You say yes and see."

He came across to her and sat on the arm of her chair. Suddenly she buried her head on his shoulder.

"I think I will," she whispered.

He lifted her from the chair, crying joyfully, "My dear! You'll never be sorry."

But when he kissed her, something free and clamorous within her seemed to die.

"I don't care," thought Sonia. "Anything is better than going on."

It was surprising how much calmer she felt.

"I'm hungry," she said. "Can't we go somewhere and have something to eat?"

He suggested the Aladdin on Sutter Street. As they passed the darkened real estate office, Sonia decided she could not have endured working there after her break with Franklin. But she would not cause comment by stopping until the end of the month.

"How soon can we be married?" Walter asked across the table.

"How soon do you wish?"

"Right away. Tonight!"

She smiled. "You know that's impossible."

"As soon as we can, anyway. You won't make me go through the banality of a large wedding, will you, Sonia?"

"No. The more quiet it is the better I'll like it."

Some inward stirring caution made her add, "if you don't mind I'd rather you wouldn't say anything about it for a while."

"Why not? Is there any doubt about it?"

"I think not, but after all it's been a very sudden decision. I'd better change my mind now than later."

His face fell.

"How long is it going to take you to be sure of yourself, Sonia?"

She was toying with the food she had ordered. In spite of her professed hunger it seemed she could not eat.

"It's like this," she confessed, frankly. "I want to go on working until the end of the month, without saying anything about it to anyone. If at the end of that time we both feel the same I'll leave the office and marry you immediately. Isn't that fair enough?"

"But I won't feel sure of you any of that time," he objected.

"Surely a month isn't so long to wait. I've read of lovers who wait for years."

He shook his head, forebodingly.

"I don't like it. I thought when you said you'd do it, it was an unconditional proposition."

Her eyes were so inexpressive they startled him.

"I said I thought I would," she explained, quietly. "If you don't like the idea all you have to do is say so."

He lighted a cigaret with fingers that shook a little.

"I certainly don't like it but if it's the best I can do. . . . As you say, it's only for a month. I'd be willing to wait more than a month for the chance of winning you, Sonia. . . ."

A little later he kissed her goodnight.

CHAPTER XXVII

SONIA slept soundly after her rather indefinite promise to marry Walter Henderson. The knowledge that he would be waiting to take her away from things at the end of the month gave her an inner courage. At any rate, she told herself, she would not have to go on working at the real estate office. Would not have to face her lover day after day, knowing she was never to be anything to him.

Waking to a gray day, with rain streaming down the window panes, she thought of Henderson with gratitude for his consideration and unselfishness. If she could never meet life quite so gaily again, at least she would face it cheerfully. Fortified by a night's sleep, Sonia found herself more capable of philosophy. She remembered the night after Franklin's first kiss when she had made up her mind to accept his love, to take whatever came and not be afraid. She had not dreamed the loss of that same love would be the hardest thing she would have to bear.

"But if this is the result," she thought, trying to be brave, "I really ought to be a better sport about it. And I'm going to start today."

She slipped from bed and bathed and dressed before Maxine was awake.

"Wake up, Sleepy Head," she called from behind the screen, where she was starting the breakfast.

Something in her tone must have surprised Maxine, for she sat up, crying, "Oh, Sonia, everything is all right, isn't it?"

A mask fell over Sonia's face.

"You promised not to ask."

"I know I did but your voice sounds so different. Haven't you and Franklin made up?"

"We have not," Sonia declared, measuring coffee with a steady hand. "But I'm through whining about it."

Maxine's blue eyes were wide with admiration.

"Well, I'll say this, you're the gamest little sport ever."

Sonia did not reply, but the warm praise fell like balm on her wounded heart.

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When she reached the office she began to work with a clearer brain than she had had for weeks. She was delighted to find that she was able to push all thoughts of Franklin from her mind.

Walter telephoned at 10 o'clock.

"Good morning, Sonia; are you half so happy as I am this morning?"

"I'm very happy."

"Are you really, dear?"

"Of course!"

"It's sweet of you to say so. I'm going to be busy all day, but I'll come for you about seven and we'll celebrate, shall we?"

"That would be lovely," she answered, appreciatively.

He would always be like that. Arranging pleasant little surprises for her.

"He knows how to treat a girl," she thought with a gnawing sense of resentment against the man she loved. Then, resolutely closing her heart to Franklin again, she went to work.

At noon when she went out to lunch she saw Franklin busy at his desk with his mail. She forced a cold little smile to meet his wretched eyes. He was suffering, she could see.

"But I can't help it," she told herself, sensibly.

She ordered a substantial lunch and ate it.

In the afternoon near closing time, Franklin came to her desk. With his blue gaze beating upon her, he asked, "May I see you tonight?"

"I'm going to be busy."

"Tomorrow night, then?"

"No," she said evenly. "I think the less we see of each other the better."

He leaned so close to her that her foolish heart began to palpitate wildly. She had only to turn her cheek to have touched his hair.

"Sonia, don't drive me too far!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I won't stand being treated like this when I know you love me!"

"Don't be too sure of that!" she retorted.

"And why not? Has anything happened since last night?"

"Quite a lot has happened. I feel entirely different about the whole affair."

His face was white and puzzled.

"I don't understand."

"You will before the end of the month," she replied, recklessly.

Violet was eyeing them with her usual curiosity, so he was forced to pass on. But when she was leaving the office at 5 o'clock he stopped her saying, "I'm going to take you home."

"I'm with Maxine," she objected.

"I'll take you both, then!" snapped Franklin.

When they reached the apartment Maxine ran in, leaving Sonia with him.

"Now I want to know," he insisted, "what you mean by that threat you made."

"I wasn't making a threat. I merely said you'd understand soon."

"You said in a month."

"All right. That's what I mean."

"Something is going to happen in a month to show me?"

Sonia was annoyed at her unusual lack of reticence.

"If you wish to put it that way, yes."

He was silent a moment, then he begged, "Who are you going out with tonight?"

"That doesn't concern you."

"But it does. Because I love you, sweetheart, just as much as ever. Is it Walter Henderson?"

Feeling her heart soften at his changed tone, Sonia took refuge in brusqueness.

"Supposing it is?"

"Because if it is, by God, I won't stand for it! I've suspected his little game all along. The dirty dog!"

"He has asked me to marry him," Sonia cried angrily. "And I am thinking seriously of doing it."

He stiffened with amazement.

"Sonia, you wouldn't? He's so much older. You can't!"

"You'll see!" she cried, stung into fury. "And if I do I shall consider myself very fortunate."

She jumped from the car and ran in without another word. She heard him tearing down the street but did not look back. Then she went inside and dressed carefully for Walter Henderson. She accepted his kiss without flinching.

"I'll get used to it after awhile," she thought, complacently.

They dined and danced at the Palace. He left her at her door with a tenderly affectionate farewell. And for the second time since her quarrel with Franklin she fell into deep, childlike slumber.

But the next day when Franklin did not appear at the office she found herself stopping her work to listen for him. When Walter telephoned, his well modulated voice grated on her tense nerves.

"I'll have to go to bed early tonight," she said.

That night, she sat before the open fire, listening for the telephone above the wind and rain. But it did not ring. At midnight she went to bed to lie, wide eyed, staring into the dark.

Franklin did not come to the office again that week.

On New Year's Eve she hurried home from the office to dress for her engagement with Walter. She was feeling utterly drained of life. The prospect of a gay party at the St. Francis held no allure. The future stretched bleakly before her.

"It will be like this the rest of my life," she thought, grimly. "All Walter's kindness can't help me. I will dress, evening after evening, for dinners and theater parties and dances, but there won't be any kick to it."

As she came up to the apartment she found Franklin's car at the curb. He sat at the wheel, looking ill and miserable. But at the sight of him, waiting for her in the rain, something, which had been silent for days, broke into wild sweet singing in Sonia's heart.

"What do you want, Franklin?"

His voice was broken with jealousy and longing as he replied, "Won't you let me talk to you, Sonia, please? I suppose you're going out with Henderson, but it won't take me long."

Her eyes, meeting his, were sad but very kind.

"Come inside," she said.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HE followed her into the cold living room. It was dark and Sonia only turned on one lamp. Standing in its orange glow she faced him, waiting with a suddenly racing heart.

He was very humble.

"Sonia, I am trying to be reasonable. I realize that I have no right to attempt to influence you. . . ."

He waited, hoping, perhaps, for her contradiction. But she said nothing so he was forced to continue.

"As I have explained to you, I cannot alter the fact of my own engagement just now."

"I don't ask you to, Franklin."

"But so long as I don't, you won't be anything to me?"

"We can always be friends."

"Hell, what possibility is there of friendship between us, ever?"

The riot of excitement surging through every vein made her agree.

"Sonia, we love each other. In reality nothing is different between us. You know that I'm engaged, that's all. But there is no real change in our relations."

"My knowing it makes all the difference in the world to me," she contended.

"Why should it, when I have explained that it can never come to anything? Can't you trust me, Sonia? Mother may not have a year to live. Her death, much as it will grieve me, will release me instantly. You are young, dear. Would it be so hard for you to wait?"

"It would be impossible for me to share your love with another girl."

He took her hands.

"It would be wicked for you to marry Walter Henderson, feeling as you do about me. Besides he is too old for you. His life is half lived. You couldn't endure it after a few months. Would that be fair to him?"

"If I marry him I'll play the game."

"But you won't marry him, will you darling? Life is too long. Years are ahead of you. Of us, Sonia."

She was silent, eyes remote, brooding. It was true that the years stretched barrenly in front of her without him. Neither Walter Henderson's attentions nor his wealth could make up for the loss of love. She was still too achingly young.

He saw his advantage and pressed it, eyes burning into hers.

"Where would your freedom be if you married him, Sonia?"

She sighed.

"It doesn't seem to mean so much to me, any more."

"But it would once you'd lost it. I understand you, Sonia. You have to be free. It would kill you to be chained for life to a man you don't love."

She withdrew her hands and began to pace the room.

"Oh, I love you, Franklin. There's no use of my denying that. But what will the years be, dragging out indefinitely? Our marriage dependent on your mother's death! We couldn't be happy waiting for a thing like that to happen."

"You're right. I won't put it like that. There is a chance that she may get stronger and live for years. God knows I hope she will. And if she does, so soon as her condition warrants, I'll break my engagement!"

She turned to him, passionately.

"You mean that, Franklin? Don't lie to me. I can't forgive you if you lie to me again."

His eyes met hers, fiercely, blazing with desire.

"I swear it, Sonia. Sonia—ah, God—I've missed you."

They were clinging to each other, like derelicts at sea. They had been almost drowned in the black waters of jealousy and suspicion, but nothing mattered now except the supreme necessity of the other's arms.

The clock struck. Sonia dragged herself away from him, crying, "I'd forgotten about Walter. He'll be here in half an hour. You'll have to go."

"I'm not afraid to leave you now," he smiled. "But this will be the last time, won't it? You won't see him any more?"

His jealousy delighted her.

"What do you expect me to do the nights you aren't here?"

"Go to bed. There won't be many of them."

"Well, I make no promises," she answered, her eyes shining.

"We'll see. I'm going to keep you so busy you'll be glad for a chance to rest."

As he was putting on his overcoat she asked, "What will you be doing tonight?"

"A dance at Burlingame."

"With HER?" She avoided his fiancee's name.

"Yes. Isn't it a shame that we can't spend it together?"

"It certainly is. Of all nights not to be together—New Year's Eve!"

"Never mind, sweetheart. It shan't happen again. Not if I have to plead a broken leg at the last minute."

Closing her ears to doubt, she put her arms about his neck, crying, "And you'll be thinking of me every minute?"

"Will I? When the New Year comes in, I'll be whispering, 'I love you, Sonia, I love you, love you. . . .'"

When he had gone she stood for a moment, hugging her happiness to her.

"Nothing has changed," she whispered. "Yet everything is different. What a fool I was to think I could give him up."

She bathed and dressed hurriedly. Maxine came in before she was ready. She looked tired and unhappy.

"Aren't you going out?" Sonia asked, surprised.

"My God, no! Mac is being a husband tonight."

Maxine sank on a chair, pulling at her wet coat with nerveless fingers.

"I'm getting sick of this, Sonia. Here I am, left high and dry on New Year's Eve—of all times!"

"Will you come with us, old thing?"

"I will not." She began to cry. "I'll stay at home and be miserable. I suppose Mac couldn't help it. Just the same I'm damned tired of it."

Her grief seeped through Sonia's joy. She felt it corroding at the edges. Not a great deal of difference, it seemed, in the demands of a wife and a fiancee.

"I won't think of it," she said, resolutely. "When you really love anyone you have to bear all sorts of things. Misunderstandings, and pain! Look at Vera . . ."

She shuddered. She felt that she had grown infinitely wiser since Christmas day. Wiser and sadder! But she would not

be sad tonight. Then she remembered Walter. What about him? Her happiness was going to be a fresh blow to him.

"I won't tell him tonight," she decided. "I can't bear to hurt him tonight."

In spite of her intentions, her attitude toward him had altered. His possessive manner, controlled though it was, irritated her in the taxi on the way to the hotel, he put his arm about her.

"Please don't do that!" she cried sharply.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't want to be all mussed up. My hair and everything."

"What a vain little creature she is," he smiled, releasing her.

Instantly, she slipped her hand beneath his arm.

"I'm sorry. You're such a peach I don't deserve you."

Later, when the bells and whistles were hustling in the New Year, Sonia sat in the midst of the tumult and heard only Franklin's voice.

"I love you, Sonia, I love you, love you . . ."

What would the new year bring to them? His mother's death? She hoped not. Far better to have him come to her, bravely, with his mother restored to health. But whatever came she resolved to meet it, fearlessly. She had learned now that each love has some cross which must be borne. She would shoulder hers, gallantly.

CHAPTER XXIX

ON the way home from the New Year's party, Sonia relaxed, sleepily, in Walter's arms. They had driven somewhere for breakfast. She was too tired to remember the name of the place. She longed only for the white peace of her own bed. He was compelled to lift her from the taxi.

"Who would have thought two little drinks could do this to you?" he teased.

She peered at him through heavy lidded eyes.

"Oh, I'm dead. But it isn't the little drinks."

"What is it, then?"

She refused to explain.

After he had gone, she dropped her clothes on the floor and fell into bed.

"To think," she yawned, luxuriously, "that I can go to sleep knowing that everything is all right."

She slept around the clock, waking to the sound of crackling logs. Maxine was mending by the fireplace. The daylight was almost gone.

Sonia stretched like a lazy cat.

"Never in my life did I have such a wonderful sleep."

"I'll say it was wonderful," smiled Maxine. "The telephone has rung no less than five times."

"Has anyone called me?"

"Two some ones!"

Sonia laughed and sprang onto the rug with bare feet.

"You may as well have the news, darling. Franklin and I are friends again."

"And his engagement?" inquired Maxine cautiously.

"Will be off as soon as he can arrange it. There's the telephone again. I'll answer it."

It was Franklin, asking if she had received his message at midnight.

"I certainly did," she admitted, shamelessly.

"What time can I come over, Sonia?"

She hesitated.

"You will be reasonable, won't you, Franklin? Because I really don't know. I promised Walter he could come for tea at five."

"What's the idea?"

"I couldn't tell him last night. Not on New Year's Eve."

"I'm afraid you're too soft hearted, darling."

"Indeed, I'm not! But he has been so decent to me. I will tell him, though, when he comes this afternoon."

"And in the meantime what about me?"

"Is it necessary for you to see me tonight?"

"It most certainly is."

"Well, if you'll tell me where you'll be I'll call you when he leaves."

"I'll be right here at home, sitting on the phone. You promise to call me no matter how late he stays?"

"I do."

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Tingling with delight at his impatience in wanting to see her, Sonia flew to dress. She found the bath tub half full of roses. Red roses with long, thick stems.

"I put them in the tub for you," Maxine explained. "The card's on the table."

The card said. "Hoping that we may share our happiness in this new year. Walter."

Very thoughtfully Sonia removed them from the tub and filled the Chinese bowls on each side of the fireplace. She was going to hurt him and she was so sorry that it brought the tears to her eyes.

Mac came for Maxine, so Sonia was alone when Walter arrived. It had been his suggestion that she serve tea that afternoon. And, although she had seen it done many times in the moving pictures, it was Sonia's first experience. She decided to use the red luster tea set belonging to Maxine. There were little cakes which she had bought the day before and thin slices of lemon. She was wise enough not to attempt sandwiches. The room was warm and softened with firelight, fragrant with Walter's roses and in her black velvet dress, Sonia felt that her setting was perfect. She intended to wait until they had finished their tea; then, setting by the fire in the

darkened room, she would confess to him. But he forced the issue.

His eyes had lighted with appreciation as he opened the door. "How festive we look. Is this all for me?"

"Who else?"

"Kiss me, Sonia! Do you really love me a little bit?"

This was not at all as she had planned. She felt that her cues had been bungled, spoiling all her lines.

"Tell me, Sonia."

"Let's have tea first."

As he discarded hat and coat, his lips tightened.

"No, I can't wait. I want to know now . . ."

She went to him, putting her hand pleadingly on his arm.

"Walter, I didn't intend to tell you just yet."

"You mean . . ."

"Oh, I can't do it!" she cried. "I have been trying to deceive myself as well as you. But there's no use going on with it. I'm in love with somebody else."

"So it is Franklin Crane," he said, softly.

"Please don't feel badly about it," she begged. "I'm not worth feeling sorry about."

"What do you think I am, Sonia? If I love you, how could I keep from being hurt? I am no boy playing at love. This has been the real thing to me."

"I know it," she agreed, wretchedly. "And you have been so sweet to me. I simply couldn't have endured this last week if it hadn't been for you."

He smiled, grimly.

"Yes, I've been of use, it seems. My God, Sonia, you don't know what this is going to mean to me . . ."

He drew the little velvet jeweler's box from his pocket.

"This damned ring seems to bring nothing but bad luck. I have had it reset for you."

"For my engagement ring?"

"Yes."

He opened the box and drew out the emerald, more brilliant than before in its new setting. Sonia's fingers twitched with longing. It had been made for her, and yet, for the second time, she was refusing it. No emerald in the world was worth the priceless jewel of her love. Nevertheless, her eyes shone.

"It's just gorgeous . . ." she stammered.

"And what am I going to do with it?"

She sighed, "Save it for some one more worthy of being your wife."

"No one but you shall ever wear this ring, Sonia."

He straightened his shoulders.

"Well, there's nothing I can say. I believe I'll go home."

"But the tea!" she cried. "Everything's all ready."

"Afraid I'm not up to it, dear. Even middle-aged Romeos have their pipe dreams, you know. Mine has just been pretty well shattered."

She watched him, ashamed and ill at ease, as he resumed his coat. But she felt that to express her sympathy would seem conceited.

"Don't look so tragic, Sonia," he said, taking her hand. "You can't help it any more than I can. And, remember, if anything ever happens to make you feel differently, my offer is always open."

When the door had closed after him, she found that she was crying. But the first sound of Franklin's voice in response to her telephone call, dried all her tears.

Half an hour later they sat by the fire, drinking tea and eating the little cakes she had purchased for Henderson. And so insensitive is youth to another's pain that neither of them saw anything incongruous in the situation. They were conscious only of supreme contentment.

Outside, the wind howled; waves broke in white, angry spray against the beach; fog horns creaked melancholy warnings to ships at sea. But in the colorful living room there was only firelit happiness. It was like a warm, cozy little nest, lined with the down of love.

"Nothing shall ever come between us again," he promised. "I couldn't stand it, Sonia. You don't know how near the ragged edge I was."

She returned his gaze tenderly.

"Yes, I do. I was a wreck myself."

"You didn't look it."

"A girl always has recourse to such aids as rouge and powder," she said, demurely.

"No," he insisted. "I believe you're stronger than I. You

would have gone on and married Walter if I hadn't come up here last night."

"And been sorry all the rest of my life."

"Yes, but even so, you would have done it, Sonia. You don't know how I went to pieces. I couldn't work or sleep . . ."

"Was that the reason you didn't come to the office?"

"Yes," he buried his head in his hands. "I did things I'm ashamed to tell you, Sonia."

"Don't then," she crooned. "Just forget about it. It's all over now."

CHAPTER XXX

SONIA walked in a trance for days. Not even an occasional pang over Walter Henderson could mar the bright serenity her reconciliation with Franklin had brought her. They were together every night until Thursday. Then, as he had anticipated, she was too tired to do anything but sit quietly by the fire and go to bed at 9 o'clock.

Every morning found him leaning across her desk. Although the winter rains were falling with gentle, stubborn insistence, Sonia's sky was cerulean blue. Without clouds!

Only one event roused her from her intense self absorption. Sidney Maine stopped in San Francisco before going back to school. She called Sonia at the office and asked her to meet her for lunch.

"Where shall we go?" asked Sonia.

"I want to look through some of the shops in Chinatown," replied Sidney. "Let's meet at the Mandarin."

Sonia was pleased to realize that she looked quite as smart as her friend when they greeted each other. Sidney's coat was more expensive. Her gloves were immaculate. She was the picture of expensive precision, but without the dashing touch that made Sonia vivid.

"But she doesn't need it," thought Sonia. "Life will unroll smoothly in front of Sidney always."

She asked about Tom. He was perfect, according to his fiancée.

"Honestly, Sonia, I never supposed I could be so foolish over anyone. But I liked him such a long time before he paid the slightest attention to me, that I can't realize it yet. You can't understand how I feel."

Sonia wished she might explain just how well she could understand. But, of course, that was impossible, since Franklin was still engaged to Sidney's cousin.

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The girls ordered lunch and smiled across the table.

"I saw your father in Owens' store before I left. He sent his love, and said to tell you he was coming up the first chance he has."

"Bless his heart! It isn't right for any father to worship a girl as he does me."

"Well, what can you do? My father is fond of me, but he doesn't begin to feel like yours."

"I wonder why it is," pondered Sonia. "I've never been particularly good to him. In fact, I'm ashamed when I remember some of my outbursts. And Vera, who has always been sweet and obedient, hasn't had half the affection from him that I have."

"It is queer," agreed Sidney. "Oh, I must tell you, Sonia, Don Stillwater is in San Francisco."

"Don Stillwater? What's he doing here?"

"His mother says he hasn't decided whether to locate here or go abroad. She wants him to have a year in Berlin."

"She would," interrupted Sonia. "I never could stand that mother of his."

"You don't like mothers, as a class, do you, Sonia?"

Sonia flushed.

"Except my own, I've never had reason to like any of them. They're always suspecting me of some deep, dark design."

"Never mind," sympathized her friend. "You get enough devotion from other sources to make up for it. And I think if you knew Don's mother better you'd feel differently about her. She's an awfully good sort, really. All of Don's friends like Mrs. Stillwater."

"No reason why I should," insisted Sonia, perversely.

She knew Sidney was staring at her in surprise, but she seemed to have some inexplicable aversion to Don's mother. She could not have explained the origin of it herself, unless it was from listening to her well-bred condescension to Sonia's mother: "Yes, yes, Mrs. Marsh, that will do nicely. A trifle shorter, perhaps! Thank you so much. You'll be sure to send it tomorrow, won't you?"

Which meant that Sonia's long legs would fly across town at the last possible moment, summoned always when she was having "most fun."

"I was going to tell you what she said, but perhaps you aren't interested," continued Sidney, sipping her tea.

"Of course I am. Was it something about me?"

"It was over at Mrs. Underwood's party for me before I left. I happened to sit next to Mrs. Stillwater and she said Don had been asking about you. I told her you had been home for Christmas and how nice you looked, etc. She asked if you liked your work. Well, you know, Sonia, I don't think we had mentioned the real estate office, except the men . . ."

Sonia nodded.

"But I said I understood you were very well satisfied. Then she drew herself up, in that positive way she has, and said, 'Don thinks she is a remarkable girl. She has never had a chance in Stockton. I hope she proves herself all he thinks she is in San Francisco.'"

Color had swept to Sonia's eyebrows. Tears stood in her eyes.

"Oh, Sidney, did she really say that?"

"Of course, she did. Why, Sonia. I didn't suppose you cared what anyone in Stockton thought of you."

"That's all you know about it, then," snapped Sonia.

The thought of the haughty aristocratic old lady defending Sonia Marsh quite overcame her. She ate her chow mein in silence, wondering for the first time if she had been unfair to others besides Don's mother.

"Come out of it," begged Sidney. "Why do you suppose I wanted to have lunch with you?"

"So you could talk about Tom," retorted Sonia. "Do you know where Don is staying?"

"No idea! Why?"

"I'd like to see him. He got my position for me, you know."

"Well, then, he knows where you are. It's his uncle's office. He'll surely look you up."

After lunch they wandered through Chinatown for half an hour, then Sidney walked with Sonia to the office. At the door they met Franklin, who beamed upon Sonia.

"Didn't have a chance to see you this morning," he began.

Sonia glanced warningly at Sidney, who had recognized him instantly. She held out her hand.

"This is Franklin Crane, isn't it? I met you at my cousin

Genevieve's two years ago. But you don't remember me, do you?"

His blue eyes, darting from her to Sonia, betrayed his surprise. But the moment passed eventually, leaving Sonia weak.

In the afternoon Franklin came to her desk.

"Now I understand who told you," he said. "It was your friend Sidney."

She did not deny it.

"Did you tell her anything about me?"

His question hurt Sonia.

"Do you think I would do that?" she asked bitterly.

"Of course, not after you knew. But before she told you?"

"No, don't worry. I don't confide in my girl friends."

He pressed her hand.

"Don't be angry, darling. I only wondered."

The husky note of passion in his voice never failed to thrill her.

"I'm not angry," she returned. "And I love you, so run along before Violet swallows her chewing gum."

His laughing gaze swept the round-eyed Violet, who turned furiously back to her adding machine.

"I saw him, though," Violet confided as he vanished down the stairs. "My God, Sonia, if he looked like that at me I'd die."

Sonia was annoyed, but collected.

"It's a good thing he doesn't then, old dear."

Violet sighed and shifted her gum.

"Oh, well, I have boy friends of my own. Don't think for a moment I am envying you."

"Oh, my no! I know better than to think anything like that."

But a few moments later she saw Violet's fuzzy head close to Frankie's. She was whispering excitedly. No doubt relaying the news that Franklin had held Sonia's hand.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE winter weeks slipped by in a dream to Sonia. She lost all sense of time during the first month of the year. She was surprised when the office calendars said February. Her days had been spent working in dreamy preoccupation. Her nights before the fire in the apartment or dancing, always in Franklin's arms.

She had purchased material for the new evening gown which her mother had promised to make for her. And some persistent trace of the school girl Sonia had made her spend much more than she had planned on brocaded silver cloth. Anna immediately objected, writing that it was too expensive and too old for a young girl. But it was impossible to change it so she was forced to make it up. When the dress came, Sonia drew it from its tissue wrappings, with enraptured eyes. It was her dream gown, made simply, but with the alluring lines Anna knew how to give. Sonia held the shimmering creation against her slender body.

"It's perfect. I wonder what Franklin will say?"

When she wore it that evening he stared at her in wonderment.

"You're like the fairy princess from some old Arabian fairy tale."

All she lacked was the emerald Walter had bought for her. His price was too high but she could not resist closing her eyes and picturing it flashing against the silver cloth.

That night when they had returned very late to the apartment, Franklin whispered. "Sonia, you have bewitched me. You are like a poison in my blood. You're driving me mad."

Intoxicated herself with his passionate phrases, she cried, "Oh, do I really do all that to you?"

He seized her, roughly, crushing the new dress.

"My God, yes! I can't sleep for thinking about you. Something will have to be done."

"Is your mother well enough to tell?"

He groaned.

"No, but she is getting stronger all the time. Darling, I can't wait much longer."

"Neither can I," she admitted, naïvely. "But we've been wonderfully happy. It's been a perfect month."

He was pondering, eyes remote, "I wonder—you won't misunderstand me if I ask you this, Sonia?"

"Silly! What do you think I am?"

"Couldn't we have a weekend together at my shack over in Marin County?"

Her eyes widened, but she did not wish to appear shocked.

"Alone?"

"Why not? We're going to be married."

Delicious shivers chased up and down her spine. But she answered slowly, "We don't want to be indiscreet."

"If you loved me you wouldn't think about that."

"But that's the very reason I do. If people began talking about us it would cheapen everything."

"Sounds like a sentimentalist, Sonia. I thought you were past that."

"But after all," she cried, eagerly, "if we are to be married, I shouldn't like to spoil things."

Warnings of Don's clamored in her ears. Maxine's words, "The minute you're sweet to them—bing!" She dared not take any risk of losing him. She decided, wisely, that it would be easier to hold him off than to have to run after him.

She put one hand against his flushed face.

"Don't be angry with me, but I love you too much to take any chances."

He drew away from her.

"I'm afraid you don't love me at all."

"Oh, Franklin—"

"Well, you're too modern to be a prude, Sonia. Our love is all that matters. There couldn't be anything wrong if you looked at it like that."

But she shook her head.

"Don't try to persuade me, dear. Something tells me it wouldn't be best. I can't explain just how I feel."

"You're afraid, Sonia."

"No, I'm not afraid in the way you mean."

"I never thought before that you would be selfish."

She answered with some spirit, "That is unjust! You seem to think it would be a simple matter."

"It would. No one need ever know a thing about it. And there need be nothing wrong about it. I have two rooms. You can have one of them and be as safe as you like. Think! We could have together every minute for two days!"

"It would be glorious but—I don't know what to say—I just don't think we should, though."

He kissed her goodnight but his disappointment had cooled his kisses.

"It's for you to say, of course. But if you really cared for me you wouldn't begin worrying over what people would say."

His reproach hurt her deeply. As a matter of fact she had been surprised at her own level-headedness. Inhibitions which she had scorned all of her life seemed to be holding her back. She felt that even if she tried she could not break away from them.

She was sitting half-dressed before the fire when Maxine came home.

"What's the matter, old dear? The weight of the whole world on your shoulders?"

Sonia lifted brooding, serious eyes.

"Maxine, I know you neither like nor trust Franklin."

"Not so fast. I admit I didn't. But he seems to be playing the game with you."

"He has asked me to go to his shack in Marin County for a weekend," Sonia said, bluntly.

But Maxine was not so surprised as she had expected her to be.

"Are you going?"

"I don't think so. Something tells me not to. It's as if I were refusing without my own volition."

"It's a good word," Maxine said, admiringly, "whatever it may mean. If you're wise, of course, you won't go."

"But he's acting funny about it. He hardly kissed me good-night. He seems to think if I loved him—"

"The bunk! And don't you pay any attention to it."

Sonia's eyes filled with tears.

"You wouldn't say that if it were Mac. I can't bear for him to think I don't trust him."

"That may be all true," admitted Maxine. "But you are expecting to marry Franklin, aren't you, Sonia?"

"Why, of course."

"Well, then, don't let him, of all men in the world, think you're easy. Play fast and loose with all the rest of them if you must, but not with the man you expect to have marry you. That's my advice and I'm sticking to it."

"I can't bear to hurt him," Sonia repeated. "I want to be everything to him he wants me to be." She threw back her head. "And I do trust him, Maxine! I am sure I could go to his shack and unless I wanted it to, nothing would ever happen."

"Perhaps," Maxine agreed, doubtfully.

"I know I could. But I don't want people to have a chance to say anything about us. If it weren't for that, I'd go."

There was silence for a moment, then Sonia spoke again.

"I don't suppose you'd consider going with us?"

"My God, what for? Your boy friend would certainly love that."

"I mean it," Sonia continued. "Perhaps Mac could come, too. We girls could have one room and they could have the other, and in the day time we could all keep out of each other's way."

"A dandy idea, but I can't believe you're serious."

"Never more so. Then Franklin couldn't say I was afraid. Yet there really wouldn't be anything wrong about it."

"You think Mac and I would be chaperones in the eyes of the world?"

"At least it wouldn't look as bad as it would for me to go alone."

The idea seemed to amuse her friend.

"Dear babe in the woods, if Mac can get away and Franklin seconds your invitation, which I don't think he'll do, I'm game."

"Really, Maxine?"

"Sure! Come on now, let's get some sleep."

When Sonia repeated her suggestion to Franklin he was not particularly pleased with it.

"I must say, I don't think much of it," he replied.

"Why not? I thought you'd be delighted. They wouldn't

be in our way and we could be together two whole days, as you said."

"Not as I said at all," he answered, shortly.

Her eyes dimmed.

"If there was nothing back of your suggestion except the desire to be alone with me for awhile, I can't understand."

He took her hands.

"Sonia, darling, that's all, honestly. Just to get clear off to ourselves. It's torture to have to leave you after being with you every night. I should like to hold you in my arms one whole night long and see the sun rise over Tamalpais."

She watched him, wistfully.

"Oh, I wish you could."

"Won't you come, then?"

"Not unless you'll ask Maxine."

In the end he asked both Maxine and Mac. Mac not only accepted, but thought he might be able to get away the next weekend.

"This is a good time to go," he said. "It's too early for the crowds yet. How about the roads?"

"I'll take care of that," replied Franklin. "I drive up there any old time. All right, it's a go, then."

Sonia was radiant. Now that he had issued the invitation Crane was in a good humor again.

"I'm going to love you to death," he warned.

But she laughed at him, confident in her own ability to handle any situation. Unafraid!—

CHAPTER XXXII

THE trip to Franklin's shack in Marin County was planned for the next weekend. They were to go in the same car.

"I'll drive Mother's large car," Franklin promised. "Then we can have plenty of room for our suitcases."

Maxine and Sonia spent their noon hours discussing what to take. Sonia insisted on sweaters and skirts, but Maxine wanted to take a silk dress.

"But why?" the younger girl asked impatiently.

"I don't want to look like something the cat dragged in," complained Maxine. "In the evenings I want to look nice."

"Don't be silly," Sonia replied. "This is no afternoon tea. I'm wearing a sweater myself."

But she bought a new one, jade green, to match her eyes.

"No wonder you're wearing a sweater," Maxine said, seeing her try it on. "If I looked like you do in sport things I'd wear one, too."

Maxine bought a new kimono.

"This old thing I have is a wreck," she explained.

Sonia distinctive always in dress disliked the rose-colored negligee Maxine bought to replace it. But she did not like to express herself too plainly, conscious that their tastes in clothes frequently clashed. In the package with the negligee was a peach-colored crepe nightgown heavy with lace.

"What is the idea?" asked Sonia. "You act like you were going on your honeymoon."

Maxine smiled. "There might be an earthquake or something. It pays to always be prepared."

Sonia said nothing, but decided secretly that her white gown and old gray negligee would have to do.

She had not seen so much of Franklin as usual that week. There had been a dinner dance in his own set, and he explained to her that if he was to be away over Sunday he should spend an evening or two during the week with his mother. Sonia

agreed, serene in the thought of the approaching weekend. He had not explained which nights were to be spent at home, but she had naturally assumed all that he was not with her, with the exception of the dinner. Having had more sleep than she was accustomed to, Sonia became restless by Thursday. She felt that she could not endure another evening alone in the apartment. For the first time since she had dismissed him, she wished for Henderson. It would be nice to have him always on hand to fill up a vacant evening, although she realized she could not expect that.

Then she thought of Don Stillwater. It had piqued her curiosity as well as her vanity that he had not bothered to look her up. She would have enjoyed talking with him. Outside of Bertie, there was no one. It had been days since she had even thought of him. His attitude at the office was coldly non-committal, but she decided instantly that it would never be safe to rouse him. Better to let "sleeping dogs lie." At last, in desperation, she telephoned Violet and suggested a "movie."

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As they waited in the line outside the Warfield, Violet whispered, "Who's that with Franklin Crane?"

He was in front of them, with only four people between. A charming, vivacious girl of his own age was beside him. Sonia stared, sick at heart, at the rich fur coat, the blonde bobbed hair curling softly under the plain little hat. Everything about her suggested breeding and luxury.

"Like Sidney, only much more so," thought Sonia.

Her eyes were blue and gay. She turned from time to time to watch the line forming behind them, keeping close hold of Franklin's arm.

It was her air of possession which whitened Sonia's face. She had known about her, but to see him with her was much more serious. And at this moment, she, Sonia Marsh, was nothing to him. Although they were separated by only a few feet, he was unconscious of her, was not even thinking of her. How could he be when his head was bent so attentively to listen to the other girl?

The line moved and they disappeared inside the theater.

Sick with jealousy, Sonia would gladly have left the line and gone home, but she dared not show any emotion before Violet. Throwing back her head, she chatted about anything else until

at last they were seated in the darkened theater and she could safely relax her stiffened features.

The picture floated before her eyes in infinitesimal, meaningless pieces, although she heard herself laughing with Violet and agreeing with her whispered comments.

The situation was impossible. She could not understand how she could have been so weak as to agree to it. A love affair with a man who was already engaged! He might as well be married. Weeks had passed since he had promised to speak to his mother. Of course, everything hinged on her condition.

"But that's ridiculous, too," thought Sonia. "The idea that any woman, even his mother, could force a man to be engaged against his will."

It would have been easier to believe if she had not seen Genevieve Erickson. But the girl was lovely. She was no washed out clinging vine, as Sonia, for some reason, had imagined her, but a charming girl, with a definite personality, and evidently used to attention.

"And he's giving it to her," continued Sonia, stabbing at her own heart. "He needn't tell me his kisses are like a brother's."

When Violet announced that this was where they had come in, Sonia had neither seen nor heard anything that had taken place. She took her hat and stumbled from the theater, blind with rage at herself and fate, and most of all, the man who had been responsible for the situation.

She parted from Violet as soon as possible, taking the street car and trudging eventually up to her own apartment.

When she had unlocked the door she lighted the fire and sat beside it lifelessly without removing hat or coat.

The new sweater she had bought hung across a chair. She turned her eyes away from it. What possible pleasure could their weekend bring now? She would constantly be seeing his face as it had looked into Genevieve Erickson's.

When the doorbell rang at 11:30, she answered it listlessly. It was Franklin and he entered as if nothing had happened, as if he had not just been sitting close beside another girl, while Sonia waited, aching for him, in the same theater.

She stared at him coldly.

"What did you come here for?"

"What do you suppose? I wanted to see you."

"I don't know why you should. Isn't this your night off?"
He dropped his coat good-naturedly.

"Why, bless its little heart, it's peeved at papa."

"Why shouldn't I be?" she blazed. "I suppose you're going to tell me you spent the evening holding your mother's hand."

"It isn't necessary for me to give an account of my evenings, Sonia."

"Well, I saw you at the Warfield with the girl you're going to marry."

"So that's it. You saw me. Where were you?"

"Waiting in the line four places back," she said bitterly, "where I suppose you'd like to keep me always. But I won't. I can't stand this, Franklin. It's killing me."

White faced they stared at each other.

"What do you mean?" he said at last.

"I mean it's got to stop. You'll have to choose now which one of us it's going to be."

CHAPTER XXXIII

SHE had not dreamed his charming mouth could be so cruel. Chiseled into granite lines! For a moment it frightened her. She had a mad desire to run to him and kiss his lips into tenderness. It hurt so that he could look like that to her.

He snapped, "Well?"

"Oh, Franklin, don't look at me like that. I don't want to quarrel with you."

"It seems to me that's all you do want to do lately."

"But it's not because I want to," she insisted. "Things keep coming up."

"If you can't take anything on trust or have any faith in me, we might as well quit."

Her face paled.

"You'd like to?"

"My God, Sonia! Haven't I shown you in every way a man can how I feel about you? Do you expect me to crawl at your feet after what you said just now?"

He began to pace the room, while she watched him, bewildered at the storm she had aroused.

"I thought the thing was all settled New Year's Eve. I didn't know we'd have to fight it out all over again every few nights. You pretend to love me, but it's a poor sort of love that goes all to pieces at the first test."

In some inexplicable way he was putting her in the wrong.

"Pretty soon you'll have me apologizing," she faltered, trying to smile.

"Oh, no! You'll never apologize. I am the only one who does that. It seems to make you happy to have me cringing like a yellow pup. Asking to be forgiven all the time."

Her green eyes were shining through tears.

"If you really think that," she said, slowly, "I guess you're right. This had better be the end."

He turned, abruptly.

"You're tired of me, then?"

She cried, "You know I'm not tired of you. But I don't think it's fair for me to be placed so that I can be hurt as I was tonight."

"You agreed to it, didn't you?"

"But I didn't understand. You must listen to me, Franklin. I didn't know that Genevieve Erickson was just a girl like myself. I thought of her as older and different. But she's young, she's pretty . . ." Her voice broke. "If you knew how it hurt to see you with her!"

He had stopped his pacing and was gazing at her, stonily.

"I don't see that her being pretty alters things any."

Sonia sat down. Her knees were trembling so that she found it impossible to stand. Already she had forgotten the rights she had intended to insist upon. She was anxious only to pacify him, to bring back some semblance of his former affection.

"I didn't mean to be a poor sport," she begged. "Seeing you together made me wild, that's all. To think that I should stand meekly behind you and have to watch you smiling at her . . . You weren't even thinking of me."

"How do you know?"

"You couldn't have been, looking down into her face all the time. Why, if you'd lifted your eyes you'd have seen me."

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All at once the anger melted from his face. His blue eyes became kind again.

"Sonia, you're just plain jealous."

Joyous over his changed tone, she ran into his arms, crying, "But can you blame me? How would you feel?"

"I know. It's a damned shame. But you needn't have worried. I was thinking of you every minute."

"If I could only believe that."

"Well, you can. I'm mad about you, Sonia. Do you know I thought you were trying to throw me over? Making a scene and all that as an excuse to go back to Walter Henderson."

She snuggled into his arms.

"Oh, you know I won't do that now. No matter what happens."

"You didn't mean what you said, did you, Sonia?"

Relaxed and warm in the blessed assurance that he still loved her, she could scarcely remember what it was she had demanded.

"About choosing 'between you,' " he murmured, lips against her black hair. "Because there's no choice about it, darling. It's only you."

Far back in her mind a harsh voice clamored that she had suffered bitterly and was to suffer again. But she could not bear to force the issue now. She had promised to wait until he could free himself. She should not go back on her word merely because she had seen the fiancée she already knew about. She clung to him as if some treacherous hand threatened to sweep her out of his arms.

"Don't give me up. No matter how angry I am, don't ever let me go away from you."

Smiling in his old winsome fashion, he lifted her face to his.

"Don't worry. I'm never going to let you go now."

Maxine, returning at one o'clock, unlocked the door and stepped into the room before they saw her.

"Sorry to interrupt," she remarked, breezily. "But it really is time for all honest working girls to be in bed. Or shall I prepare a place for myself in the bawth tub?"

Sonia disengaged herself from her lover's arms, tremulous with the different emotions which had shaken her in those few hours.

"No, Franklin is going now. Aren't you, dear?"

"It looks that way."

Maxine discreetly disappeared while they bid each other a lingering goodnight.

"Oh, darling," she whispered. "I will not be suspicious again. But you won't make it any longer than you just have to?"

His voice was husky with passion as he replied, "Sweetheart, I won't! You'll be repaid for all of this, some day."

When he had gone she became conscious of intense fatigue. Limbs and body ached from the violence of her reaction. But she did not tell Maxine that she had almost given up her lover an hour earlier. Instead, she closed her eyes and drifted deep into slumber.

She awakened at six o'clock. The room was gray with a cold, wet dawn. Wisps of fog floated in through the window, clinging damply to the bedclothes, which she drew higher about her chin. And the voice she had refused to heed the night before began to nag her.

"What have you gained? You've even lost in his eyes by pulling a scene that accomplished nothing."

"But he loves me," she protested, weakly.

"Does he, indeed? And what good will it do you? Where is it leading you? You, who demanded freedom!"

She shivered and springing from bed, ran to the window. Beads of water lay along the sill. The air seemed saturated. The city peered ghostlike through its white drifting mantle. A sense of foreboding came over her. Life was so startling. Sudden tragedies loomed up as those buildings below rose from the fog. She had ridden rough shod, over all objections to carry out her plans for coming to San Francisco, to lead her own life! Yet how much freedom had she won after all? Was she not bound more than before by her infatuation? And these chains she had no strength to break, though they wounded her cruelly!

She closed the window and crept back into bed. When Maxine opened her eyes she found Sonia staring at her.

"Maxine," she inquired, earnestly. "Do you ever worry about what's going to happen to you?"

"Why should I?" yawned Maxine. "What's to happen will happen regardless."

"But don't the years ahead of you ever loom up with a terrifying significance? Do you ever think about the future?"

Maxine sat up in bed.

"Have you a fever? Or what in the world is eating you? I'll bet you're getting cold feet about our weekend."

"No I'm not. Although I do have a feeling . . ."

"Oh, hush! You'll have me shedding tears all over the place. Don't fool with my emotions, kiddie. I'm too tender-hearted. Better take a hot bath and some aspirin. Everyone feels low once in awhile."

CHAPTER XXXIV

SONIA followed Maxine's advice and, fortified by the bath and a cup of hot coffee, was able to quiet the melancholy voice. When she reached the office she found it easier to close her thoughts to her own affairs and bury herself in her work. It was Friday and the next day they were to go to Franklin's shack for the weekend. She determined to work so hard that she would have no opportunity to think about it.

Franklin did not appear at the office that morning but she knew that he was often busy outside.

Maxine whispered, "You don't suppose anything is wrong, do you?"

Sonia smiled, "No! Don't worry!"

As she went for lunch she followed a tall familiar figure through the office. She could not think who it was. Then realization came to her. At the same moment he turned and cried, "Sonia!"

"Dr. Don Stillwater!"

They greeted each other warmly. Something kind in his big, firm grasp made Sonia cling to his hand.

"You were in the office and didn't come up to see me?"

His eyes evaded hers.

"I was going to look you up later."

"I'm afraid you weren't, though. Sidney told me weeks ago that you were here. I should think you'd have wanted to see me. You're responsible for my being here, you know!"

They walked up Sutter Street, Sonia almost running to keep up with his long strides.

"I've been awfully busy," he explained, briefly.

"Have you decided to locate in San Francisco?"

"Not just yet. I expect to study in Berlin this summer."

She was disappointed.

"Then it will be worse than ever," she complained. "I'll never be able to get any advice."

He glanced at her, keenly.

"You still want it? I thought you had decided mine wasn't worth a lot?"

"I told you I would forget that," she said, serenely. "Your advice is solicited, as per usual."

Then his face brightened as he answered, "I don't know whether to be complimented or insulted."

"At what?"

"At your remarkable power of forgetfulness. You're looking very smart, Sonia. Thinner but very much prettier!"

She lifted delighted eyes.

"We thank you. Here's where I go for lunch."

"May I eat with you? I'm really awfully glad to see you again."

She realized as they took their places at a little table that his manner was more formal than it had been in Stockton. And during lunch she endeavored to bring the old warm note into their relationship, but failed.

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When it was time for her to leave he offered to walk back to the office with her.

"You haven't asked about my affairs or the men I've met or anything," she challenged.

"I guess there have been plenty of them."

"A few," she boasted, complacently. "But I have really thought of the things you told me lots of times. I've tried to be careful."

He did not smile.

"It's none of my business, you know. I was a silly fool to try to lay down the law to you."

"I needed it."

"You seemed such a sophisticated little kid," he explained. "But I suppose you thought me nothing but a conceited pup."

She touched his arm, timidly.

"I have never thought of you as anything but kind and good. If I were in trouble I would come to you before anyone."

His dark eyes lighted with pleasure.

"That's sweet of you, Sonia. You see, my dear, I've felt rather badly about that last day."

"Because you kissed me?"

"Because I lost my head after preaching to you for hours. It has seemed to put a barrier between us. I didn't feel free to look you up."

"Oh, is that the reason?"

"Yes. I thought it might be easier for you not to see me. I hated to remind you of something unpleasant."

She wondered what he would have said if she told him how many kisses she had had since his!

When they reached the office he held out his hand and again she felt its warm comfort.

"Won't I see you again before you go?"

He hesitated.

"I'll be here for several weeks before I sail."

His voice sounded strained as he continued, "I suppose you'll be busy over the weekend?"

The color swept into Sonia's cheeks. How he would disapprove of her plans for an unchaperoned weekend in Franklin's shack! She could not meet his eyes.

"Yes," she admitted.

He smiled.

"I'm sorry, but I'll call you again, some time."

"You do that. I don't want you to go away without saying good-bye."

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She turned to watch him after she had entered the office. There was something disciplined about him, something strong that appealed to her imagination. Was it the years that he had spent in the war? Or the requirements of his professional training? In spite of the money that had been spent on his education, and the privileges he had enjoyed, she had never known a man so self-controlled. With a single exception of the time he had kissed her! Climbing the balcony stairs, she remembered the shock it had been to her. The only time in her life when a kiss had really taken her by surprise. And his attitude since had been humbly regretful! In some way their relations seemed to be reversed. It was she who was sure of herself. And he treated her as if she were no longer a little girl.

"But his mother defended me," she thought, hanging her hat and coat in the dressing room. It brought a warm feeling of gratitude to remember how Mrs. Stillwater had spoken of her

to Sidney. She had hoped Sonia would prove worthy of Don's confidence. Yet tomorrow she planned . . .

The dressing room door opened to admit Maxine.

"Sonia, come to the telephone. Franklin has called you for the second time. What do you suppose is wrong?"

"I can't imagine."

"Well, hurry. He's holding the line. Oh, Sonia, I can't stand it if our plans fall through now."

Sonia walked quickly to the telephone, wondering what new blow fate had in store for her.

CHAPTER XXXV

FRANKLIN'S words came distinctly over the telephone.

"Sonia, I'm awfully sorry but we will have to postpone our trip for tomorrow."

"What is the matter?"

"My mother is worse again. We have had a consultation of doctors this morning. Her heart is weak. They say the least shock . . ."

She rallied to the broken note in his voice.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I wish I could do something."

"Thank you, dear. There's nothing anyone can do. She's had attacks like this before and pulled through. But I never know . . ."

There was a pause while her love for him sang silently across the wire. She dared not say it in words.

"I'm awfully sorry about tomorrow."

"Don't worry about that," she comforted. "Call me again, won't you?"

He promised and she turned to meet Maxine's disappointed eyes.

"Don't tell me it's off."

"Absolutely. His mother's sick."

"Oh, hell!" Maxine exploded, disgustedly.

Sonia stiffened.

"He can't help it, you know. It's harder on him than it is on us."

"Are you sure it's his mother?" inquired Maxine, suspiciously, following her to her own desk.

"What else would it be?"

"You remember what I told you."

"About his being drunk, I suppose you mean?"

"Yes."

Sonia stared at her like an offended empress.

"There never was anything to those stories. It's always been his mother. He told me so himself, a long time ago."

Maxine tossed her head. Her blue eyes were as angry as Sonia's.

"His story may be all jake this time but that hasn't always been his reason. Don't try to tell me, because I happen to know."

Sonia was furious. The other girls in the department were listening to the conversation. It was so unusual to hear Maxine and Sonia quarreling. So evident that they were doing nothing else!

"If that's the way you feel about it, I'm surprised you'd accept his invitation," Sonia remarked, acidly, and opened her books.

Maxine tossed her head. Here the interested audience, choked back her reply and walked away.

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But when closing time came she was waiting for her friend. They walked, silently, to the car, silently rode home! As they entered the apartment, Maxine said, "Kiddie, I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings today. I was so disappointed I didn't know what I was saying."

"I know you haven't any faith in him," Sonia commented, gloomily. She was on her knees before the fireplace.

"I've worked in the office for a good many years, Sonia. He used to come to work so drunk they'd have to send him home."

Sonia said nothing but her silence was ominous.

"That was a long time ago," Maxine admitted, nervously. "But for several days afterwards he'd be away. Naturally we supposed that was always the trouble."

"Yes, naturally, you'd all suppose the most uncharitable thing you could think of."

Maxine disappeared behind the screen and there was a sound of clattering pans.

Then she peered around to add, "I'm not saying that's what it is this time."

"It wouldn't make a bit of difference to me if you did," flared Sonia. "You answered the telephone. You ought to know he's not drunk."

"Well, he did sound worried."

"Well, then," said Sonia, scornfully.

They ate their frugal dinner in cheerless animosity, washing the dishes afterwards with twice their ordinary speed.

When they had finished, Maxine sighed, "I suppose I ought to telephone Mac."

"You can't call him at home."

"Can't I? You watch me. If he doesn't answer I'll hang up. See?"

She called the number, anxiously. Mac must have answered for she said, in a low, important tone, "I had to telephone. Bad news about tomorrow."

She giggled as she replaced the receiver.

"He's a dandy. From his voice his wife would be sure he was talking about business. 'Is that so,' he said, 'I'm very sorry to hear it. I'd better come down and talk it over.'"

For some reason the dignified Mac's cleverness failed to amuse Sonia.

"You don't think that's funny, do you?"

"I certainly don't. I'd die before I'd call a man under his wife's nose. And I think you've got your nerve to criticize anyone else. At least Franklin Crane is not married."

Maxine was pulling down her long blonde hair.

"Zat so?" she called, cheerfully. "Well, I hope for your sake he stays that way."

Sonia sat by the window, staring into darkness, and the myriad lights beneath. She felt dull and spiritless. Although she had been conscious of secret misgivings about the prospective party, it was sickening to have it called off. It seemed impossible to wait for another week. Perhaps his mother would die. If she did, they would not be able to go at all. Then she caught her breath, as she realized if his mother died Franklin would be free to marry her. He had said her death would release him instantly.

But he loved his mother. She had understood the break in his tense voice over the telephone. If his mother died perhaps he would turn against Sonia, would imagine she had wished for her death. And comforted by the dainty little fiancée his mother had chosen, might decide to marry her as a last tribute.

Blinking through tears, Sonia pictured the wedding. Genevieve, sweetly proprietary, with her white gloved hand on

Franklin's arm. And he, pale from suffering, gazing down as he had at the theater.

"Oh," she gasped, drawing back from the dark window. The ghosts she had seen were too real. Perhaps this was the tragedy she had felt looming over her since morning. Certainly she had felt prickly with nerves all day. She paced the apartment, restless, worried.

Mac came at eight o'clock, entering as if he were about to address a group of public spirited citizens.

"What's this about tomorrow," he demanded, kissing Maxine formally.

"Franklin's mother is sick and the party is all off."

Both girls looked at him, miserably. But his face showed no tiny flicker of emotion.

"That's unfortunate. I had made all my arrangements for being away."

Maxine's eyes filled with tears.

"Wouldn't you know something would have to happen . . . ?"

Sonia added, icily, "Franklin is awfully sorry. It's just postponed. Perhaps we can go next week."

"I may not be able to get away again so soon. But it can't be helped, of course. Cheer up, little girl; you're not going to cry about it?"

Maxine dabbed at her blue eyes.

"I'm so disappointed. It just kills me to have my plans knocked out like this. I never wanted to do anything so badly in my life. I've got to go, that's all."

Mac smiled at her wild tone. But Sonia turned away.

"Sonia's mad at me, too," sobbed Maxine.

"Oh, I am not," replied Sonia. It makes me tired, though, for you to act as if this were Franklin's fault."

"My God!" sighed Mac, drying Maxine's tears, with a neatly folded white handkerchief, "am I going to be called in to settle a dispute between you two girls?"

When he had gone Maxine apologized for everything she had said and Sonia, tired of the argument, was glad enough to accept her overtures. Franklin Crane was never discussed by them again. But only a week later Sonia was to remember how uncompromising she had been with Maxine, to remember with tears stinging her eyes and tugging at her throat!

The next afternoon Franklin telephoned to say his mother was no better. It would be impossible for him to see Sonia before Monday. Sonia, with Sunday hanging empty on her hands, thought of Dr. Stillwater. He had asked if she would be busy over the weekend. Perhaps she could reach him at his uncle's. She telephoned, sighing with relief when he answered, "Yes, Sonia?"

"My weekend party is off. Have you anything to suggest?"

"You bet I have. The prettiest hike you ever dreamed of."

"I'm not much of a hiker."

"This is a little one, Sonia. I've taken it several times, and I know you'll love it. It's in Marin County."

Her hand trembled as she turned from the telephone.

She was to spend Sunday in Marin County after all.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE Saturday night she had planned to spend in Franklin's shack, Sonia slept in the bath tub. Maxine had explained, rather nervously, that Mac was supposed to be out of town. His wife had gone to Oakland, and it was a wonderful chance for a late night. But Sonia, heavy with sleep, could have sworn it was dawn when Maxine dragged her from her cramped resting place. She felt cross and tired as she slipped from bed at six o'clock. She wished that she had not promised to go for a hike with Don Stillwater.

"I might have known," she muttered, drawing the old brown sweater over her head, "that he'd suggest something wholesome."

She swallowed a cup of hot coffee but the hands that held the cup were shaking. When her teaspoon fell clattering to the floor, she could have shrieked. She was strung to the breaking point, like a violin string ready to snap!

Don's smile when he met her at the Ferry should have repaid her. He beamed approvingly on her low-heeled, sensible shoes, and the old sweater.

"How are you, Sonia?"

"Cross as a bear!"

"Did you have any sleep last night?"

"I went to bed early enough." (None of his business where.)

"But I'm tired all the time lately."

His gaze was professional and as always she resented the impersonality of it.

"Too many late hours, I'm afraid. You girls never will realize that you can't burn the candle at both ends. You look nervous, are you?"

"I certainly am," she admitted. "But what can I do about it? Don't preach about my health. That's the one thing I can't stand."

She felt that she would burst into tears if he pursued the sub-

ject. But he said very little as they crossed to Sausalito. The ocean breeze freshened against her face and Sonia's spirits lifted. By the time they had reached Fairfax, she was teasing him about the day he had invited her inside his mother's house for lemonade.

"You had no idea that your charitable invitation would make you responsible for the rest of your life . . ."

"I wish it did," he responded, laughingly. "I'd make you walk the chalk, young lady."

She smiled back at him.

The hike was little more than a walk up a winding trail beside rippling cascades of water. The beauty of it soothed Sonia's jaded nerves like a quiet hand. She could not remember ever having felt such serenity of spirit as she knew that morning on the trail with Don Stillwater. At noon they stopped to sit on clean, flat rocks and eat the sandwiches and chocolate he had brought. Sonia pulled the crimson tam from her damp hair and relaxed, luxuriously.

"This must have been what I needed. I'm tired now, but in such a different way."

"You should have more exercise, your muscles are getting soft."

"I dance," she answered.

"That's fine, if you don't overdo it. But there's nothing like getting out in the fresh air." The color deepened in his cheeks. "You're like a little, hot house flower."

There was silence until she said, lazily, "I wish you wouldn't go away."

"Why?"

"I just don't want you to. You understand me better than anyone else."

"Do you really think that?"

"Yes, I do."

He laughed.

"I'm afraid you're wrong. As a matter of fact, some of the things you say and do are totally incomprehensible to me. And I never know what to expect next."

Sonia was offended.

"But I thought you really approved of me a little bit," she said, wistfully. "I had hoped you liked me."

He put both hands over hers, pressing them down against the hard rock.

"Does it matter to you, Sonia? Or am I just another man? Another scalp for you to dangle at your belt?"

He could not doubt the sincerity which rang in her reply.

"Of course it matters. I used to hate you because you had so many things I didn't have. A chance to study and travel! But after I understood how kind you were, I think you are the kindest person I know. Why wouldn't I like you? You are not like any other in the world."

"Does that mean that you care for me?"

The implication of his words brought her up short. How could she reply without hurting him? Perhaps he wasn't serious, yet his face was anxious and strained. Embarrassed and confused, she tugged at her hands but he did not release them.

"I want the truth, Sonia. Don't try to evade me. I've loved you since the day I kissed you. I did not intend to tell you. I didn't want to care for you. There are times when I suspect you of not possessing any heart. But, I can't help it. If you love me the tiniest bit . . ."

His voice broke. His hands over hers were trembling.

"But how can you love me? You—Dr. Stillwater . . ."

"It doesn't matter who I am. It's what we are that counts. You tried to make me think you were a sophisticated little kid, but don't you know that I can tell you're as innocent as an angel?"

"Oh, Don," she said, sadly. "I wish I were all you think I am. But I'm not."

Suddenly it occurred to her that this should be her "line."

She would not hurt him when he so gallantly offered her a chance which would have flattered almost any girl in Stockton. She would not admit that she did not love him. She would make it a question of the difference in their positions.

"I wouldn't do," she said, softening her words with the real tears which stood in her eyes.

"We have been brought up too differently. I've never been used to any of the things which are second nature to you."

"That doesn't matter."

"But it would once we were married. And there's your

mother! Think how it would hurt her to see you who might marry anyone . . ."

She was almost convincing herself with her tragic tone. A great little actress was Sonia, thrilling to the pathos in her own voice!

"I can't believe you'd refuse me on account of that," he said puzzled. "If I thought you really loved me, I'd never let that stand in my way. But I'm not sure. Do you love me, Sonia?"

She turned the mystery of her eyes upon him.

"Do you expect me to tell you?"

"Then you do?"

"Perhaps!"

"You don't?"

She smiled.

"Think whatever you like. Marriage between us would be impossible."

She flattered herself that she had managed that scene rather well.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ON the boat returning to San Francisco, Sonia found herself wondering if Don really had proposed. It seemed impossible, sitting beside him, listening to his gay, inconsequential chatter of incidents in medical school, or the more serious stories of lives with which he had come into contact at the hospital. Utterly impersonal, his dark eyes gazed cheerfully into hers. He loved his work. She could see that it was like a great flame, lighting up his life. No girl's refusal could break Don Stillwater, she thought, regretfully. His wife would lead a satisfying sort of life, playing the "Good Samaritan" to poor families, when his professional skill was no longer necessary, going with him on his trips to Europe. He had a way of repeating the most ordinary stories with so much sympathy that Sonia found herself utterly absorbed. She preferred him to Walter Henderson. He was so young and full of enthusiasm, in spite of his experience. Burning with a desire to share his gifts with a world sodden with self-indulgence on one side, and gaunt with grinding, abject misery on the other.

Sonia's eyes were shining. The color high on her cheeks from her day out of doors. If it were not for Franklin Crane she would have been glad to walk through life by Don's side. Sheltered without being restricted, always amused, always interested!

But even the merest wisp of a thought of Franklin brought him dancing before her eyes, sweet, tender, irresistible. No other man in the world could give her that delicious, terrifying, sinking feeling she experienced when she saw him. Leaning against Don, she closed her eyes. Supposing she were in her lover's little shack tonight? Close in his arms? Could she even consider anyone else?

A group of tired boys and girls sat on the upper deck, singing snatches of popular songs. They were cloyingly sentimental,

but something wild and passionate in Sonia's heart responded to the lilting harmony.

When she opened her eyes she found Don looking at her, curiously. His face wore the scientific investigating expression, which she resented.

"Did you ask me something," she inquired suspiciously.

"It doesn't matter. You were lost in dreams, weren't you, Sonia?"

She could not deny it.

"Won't you tell me what they were?"

Her green eyes were baffling, secretive. She determined that at least her thoughts should remain inviolate from even him.

When he left her at her door, he said, "I may not see you again, my dear."

"Why not?"

"Why should I? I have no intentions of whining over something I can't have."

"But I do enjoy being with you so much. I love to talk with you."

"Just now it's better not. When I return from Berlin I shall hope to see more of you."

She said, perversely, "You think you'll have me out of your mind by that time?"

"Out of my heart, Sonia. The world is full of a number of things, although it's rather difficult for me to see them just now."

His voice was so controlled she suspected him of teasing.

"Well, I didn't think your declaration was very serious. I suppose you can scarcely wait to get to Berlin, where you can start flirting to your heart's content?"

"On the contrary," he said, in a voice like steel, "If I thought you had one single atom of real affection for me I'd drag you off by the hair, if necessary. I'd marry you tonight."

Without another word he walked away, leaving Sonia humiliated and bewildered on the steps of her apartment house.

Inside, she found a note from Maxine, telling her to call Franklin. Without waiting to remove sweater or tam, she picked up the telephone.

"Did you just get in?" he asked.

"Yes, I've been hiking with an old friend of mine."

"Not Walter Henderson?"

"No, Franklin. How is your mother?"

"She's better tonight. I think she's going to be all right again. I want to see you."

"Isn't it too late?"

"No. Mother is asleep. I could run over for a little while, if you want me to . . ."

She was aching tired and dusty from her long tramp, but she could not refuse him.

"All right. But don't start for ten minutes."

"I'm starting NOW."

Her relaxed nerves tightened like taut wires. She flashed about the room turning on lamps, lighting the fire and incense in Maxine's brass bowl. Then, dropping her clothes as she ran, she jumped into a hot bath. She had just time to start dressing when the doorbell rang. She ran to admit him, wrapped in the gray negligee, as freshly fragrant as a half-opened rose.

Franklin seized her in his arms. He devoured her with kisses, hard, stabbing, painful kisses, that bruised Sonia's white flesh, but left her clinging about his neck.

"Oh, God, I love you."

"I want you to."

"I could eat you alive like some flesh-eating cannibal. Two gulps and you'd be all gone . . ."

"What a gorgeous sensation! I'm sure I'd love it . . ."

They were stammering words and phrases, but half conscious of what they implied.

"Sonia, our weekend shall be next week. Mother will be all right for a while."

"Max isn't sure he can arrange to get away so soon."

"He'll have to. He can manage it some way. If he doesn't, I'll take you, anyway."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"You watch me. If that bad actor doesn't bring his sweetie along, we're going alone."

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She shivered in his arms, torn between the desire to be carried off and the knowledge that Mac must go. She could not trust herself to go alone, not if she felt as she did tonight.

He sank upon the davenport without releasing her.

"I must finish dressing," she objected, weakly.

"Do you think I'm going to pass up an opportunity to hold you like this—all soft and cuddly. I love you—love you . . ."

Little voices within her dinned in her ears: "If you weaken the least bit," "There are experiences in life no woman wants to endure," "Our Sonia is always a good girl . . ."

"No!" she cried, tortured by them into resistance.

She did not want to resist. She wished only to be swept away on that sweet, intoxicating tide which seemed to engulf her. But the inner voices would not leave her alone.

"Franklin, please . . ."

"I love you . . ."

"Oh, don't," she wailed, raging at those restraints which pushed her from him like invisible hands. "Damn everything and everybody that keeps me from you."

"Nothing can keep you from me, Sonia."

She brushed her hand across her eyes and sat straight.

"But something does. I'm not responsible for it. I deserve no credit for it." Her voice was bitter.

Something in her chilled tone carried conviction.

"I see," he said.

She was silent as he rose, fumbling for his coat and hat, kissing her triumphantly.

"I have to go now, sweetheart. But you'll see. You'll see."

When he had gone she sank onto the cold floor in tears. Every nerve in her body ached for him . . . And she let him go . . .

After a long time she rose and went to bed. But not to sleep. The comfortable indolence her day with Don had brought was shattered irrevocably. She wondered if Mac would arrange to go next Saturday. What would she do if he did not? No longer capable or very desirous of controlling a situation which was clearly becoming too much for her, she decided, shivering, that she dared not go with him now. Even with Maxine and Mac along there would be opportunities which she knew he intended to seize.

She was amazed and angry at the strength of her inhibitions. To be tied against her will to girlhood ideals! Standards of conduct, which had been drilled into her heedless ears for years, had suddenly twisted into a rope heavy enough to force her away

from him. She told herself that it was a good thing, even while she rebelled. She wished to marry Franklin, to go to him with nothing clandestine between them. But all the warm young blood in her veins fought for him. In her sleep she was sobbing for him, stretching out empty arms. She awoke to darkness. Tears were streaming from her eyes.

"Why is it?" she cried. "Why is life so hard? Always snatching away the one thing you want most? Hundreds of girls marry the man they love. Why can't I?"

For the first time she wondered if her life might be controlled by a sinister fate over which she had no influence. The future was not the clear, untroubled crystal she had thought, but a clouded surface, dark and disturbed with forebodings!

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN spite of a restless night, Sonia awoke encouraged. The sun was shining. It was another day. The sheer vitality of her refused to permit her to remain melancholy. Something might happen. Things would change. "It's a long lane that has no turning."

Cheered by the unexpected brightness of the sun in winter, she whistled, as she dressed. It irritated Maxine.

"Cut it out. Don't you know this is Monday morning?"

Maxine was pale and listless. Shadows lay like little sooty smudges beneath her eyes.

She groaned, "How can I ever stand it for another week?"

"Stand what?"

"The everlasting monotonous grind of the office. The silly mistakes of those silly girls. The eternal, never-ending sameness of it, day in and day out."

Sonia stared at her. She had never felt like that except for those few awful days when she had quarreled with Franklin. Her work was tiresome but it was only a means to an end. She had never taken her bookkeeping seriously.

"Do you suppose Mac can go on our party next Saturday?"

Maxine yawned.

"I don't know. And I don't seem to care this morning about that or anything else."

"Will you ask him?" said Sonia, not deceived by the other girl's apparent indifference. She would care when the time came. She had been wild to go on Saturday.

Maxine was splashing cold water on her white face. She still wore the old blue bathrobe.

"I'll ask him darling. Count on little Maxine. We'll be there if possible."

But Mac was uncertain. He kept them all in suspense, although Crane insisted that Sonia was coming anyway. It was

a restless, unsatisfactory week, full of undercurrents. Sonia was resolved not to go without the other two, yet felt her resolution weakening day by day. Maxine was nervous and depressed.

She was "fed up," she repeated, bitterly, with this affair of hers. She'd been a fool to let Mac come near her after she knew he was married, and on and on, endlessly. Sonia developed a faculty of appearing to listen intently, dropping a sympathetic comment at discreet intervals, but, all the time, deep in her own thoughts.

She saw very little of Franklin. His mother still demanded a great deal of his attention. He admitted, reluctantly, that Genevieve Erickson had been invited to dinner on Wednesday. Sonia was sweet about it, pretending not to care. But she spent the evening alone in the apartment, mending, with her lips set in a grim line.

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Friday morning, a dripping, dismal morning, Mac telephoned that he could go. Maxine floated to Sonia's desk, with eyes like a child's at Christmas time.

"Mac can go!" she whispered.

At the definite knowledge that she would no longer have to fight her desire to go without them, Sonia felt enervated and weak. She worked, mechanically, eyes on her figures, her mind doing somersaults from the terms of the contracts before her to those hushed hidden moments in Franklin's arms. The longing for him was a physical pain. Almost unendurable! Then she felt the hush of the other girls in the department and looked up to see her father's shabby figure, standing beside her. She was compelled to rub her hand across her eyes. He had been so far from her thought.

"What's the matter, Sonia?"

Count on him seeing that furtive, bewildered motion. Sonia smiled.

"Why I'm so surprised! What do you mean sneaking in on me like this?"

He chuckled like a truant schoolboy.

"I guess I surprised you, all right. I've taken a day off."

She was holding his hand, noticing more than ever his beaten, apologetic manner. But the blue eyes were beaming in his lined face.

"The whole day," he repeated. "Do you suppose you can get away?"

"I'm afraid not, Daddy. Not for so long, but I'll ask for extra time at noon. I can't believe you'd take that long trip just to stay one day."

"I'd do more than that for a glimpse of you."

She sent him away with a promise to meet him at noon. When she found him outside the real estate office she suggested that they go to a little French restaurant far out on Montgomery Street.

"We'll walk through Chinatown," she said, "and you can talk to me."

He surprised her by answering, with unusual firmness, "You're going to do the talking this time, Sonia."

"But I've nothing to talk about. Life goes on just the same . . ."

"Honey," he said, gravely, "I've been worried about you ever since you were home."

"Now, Dad . . ."

"Yes, Mother and I both. Something had happened. You were changed."

Tears welled up into his eyes.

"It almost kills us to think anything is making you unhappy and we can't help you."

Sonia swallowed a lump in her throat.

"Nonsense! I know what's the matter with you. Just because I shed a few tears the day I came away! That was natural. Any girl might have done that."

She was talking, aimlessly, trying to avoid his steady, sorrowful gaze.

"Some girls might, but not you. Your old Dad knows you better than that. I can see there's something still bothering you. You look tired and nervous. . . ."

"Oh, Father! Please! Won't you ever realize that I've grown up?"

Pain was stamped upon his features.

"Not me, Sonia. You'll never be grown up to me. Do you know what I dreamed last night?"

They had reached the intersection of Grant Avenue and California Street. Looking up, Sonia saw old St. Mary's

Church. There was an inscription in the tower below the clock which she had never noticed before. She read it now, trembling at its terrifying significance.

"My son, observe the time and fly from evil."

Why should she have seen it now? At this particular moment, when she needed every faculty to evade her father.

In that second it was beaten into her brain never to be forgotten.

"Sonia, I was speaking to you."

"Yes, Father?"

His voice was gently insistent.

"I said I wanted to tell you about my dream."

"Observe the time and fly from evil—fly from evil—Yes, Daddy?"

"I dreamed you were a little girl again. You had fallen in your play and when you came running to me your feet were muddy. I sat down," he smiled, "and held you on my lap while I washed them. Just like I've done many a time. Those little, stumbling feet . . ."

His voice broke and he turned away.

"Won't you tell me, Sonia? Whatever it is?"

But she could answer nothing. Struck into dumbness by the dream he had related, following the significance of the sign in the church tower! Seeing it was useless, he began to talk of other things, but his eyes kept searching her white, miserable face. He had succeeded in making her miserable.

Later when he started on his journey home, defeated, more convinced than ever that something was wrong, she kissed him, tenderly.

"Oh, darling, you know I love you."

"You are keeping something from me, honey. From your old Dad, who loves you more than life itself . . ."

As she turned away her eyes were wet with tears.

CHAPTER XXXIX

SONIA walked to her car, blindly. Why was her father able to reduce her to this irresolute welter of sentimentality? She was furious, yet the mere thought of his anxious, loving face brought fresh tears. She loved him with something of the protecting pity of a mother. Desired to shield him from knowledge of the evil about him. If he could have seen some of the parties she had attended, some of the high moments of her career, it would have broken his heart.

Swaying beneath a strap in the crowded street car, Sonia wondered, drearily, just how elastic the term, "nice girl" could be. She was sure her father would be convinced no "nice girl" could do the things she had done. He liked Maxine, had spoken of her with admiration. How his attitude would change if he knew she was conducting an affair with a married man!

Sonia had been disgusted, at first. But, lately, it had ceased to appear so vulgar. Mac began to seem like any other suitor. She forgot that he had a perfectly legitimate wife somewhere in San Francisco. It was rather confusing, and blurred her first definite idea that it was both common and wrong. So many things seemed different when one was close to them.

She was fond of Maxine. Liked her better than any other girl she had ever known. Although she was lacking in the finer sensibilities of Sidney, she was more tolerant, more impulsive, better "fun."

Sonia left the car and began the walk up the hill to her apartment. Underneath the weariness that dragged at her limbs, she felt the necessity of coming to some decision. What did she intend to do about the approaching weekend? She had tried to blind herself to the question involved, by refusing to think. Her mind had shied away from every attempt at serious consideration.

"It's just a party," she had said to herself.

Yet, deep in her heart, she knew it would be like no other party she had ever attended. She had proudly fancied herself equal to any situation. But since last Sunday night when Franklin had held her in his arms, she realized her own weakness. It was no use trying to evade the issue. If she went, she would do it with her eyes open to every possibility. She would not be led into a trap blindfolded.

"Observe the time and fly from evil." The inscription in the tower of old St. Mary's Church had been a warning. Coming just before the revelation of her father's dream. He loved her so much he still dreamed of washing her little muddy feet. She must not hurt him. He might never know, but, oh, if he should!

She was torn between the intense desire to be with her lover, and the affection which her father always succeeded in rousing.

"But he shan't keep me from going," she declared, trying to shut out the memory of his anxious eyes.

When she opened the door of the apartment, she found Franklin waiting for her. Surprised and pleased, she ran into his arms.

"How did you get in?"

"Maxine gave me her key. Darling, what's the matter? You look like the chief mourner at a funeral."

She held him at arm's length, crying, tragically, "I can't go."

"Can't go where? Sonia, you don't mean tomorrow?"

She nodded.

"But, see here . . . What's the idea? I thought it was all decided. Everything's ready. You can't back out now."

"I'll have to."

He drew her back into his arms and sat down beside the unlighted fire.

"What's happened, Sonia? Why can't you go? Tell me!"

She buried her head in his coat and began to cry. When she finally attempted an explanation it was halting and broken.

"I want to. You know nothing in the world seems so desirable as a weekend with you. . . ."

"Well, then?"

"But I can't do it."

He kissed her, silently.

"Everything's against our going. Your mother's illness last week. Then, today, my father came."

"So, that's it."

"That's only part of it. He is such an innocent darling, and so afraid something is going to happen to me. Oh, Franklin!"

She could not tell him of her father's dream. Could not relate the feelings that had come over her when she looked up to see the sign in the tower. Like the voice of God whispering in her heart! So she faced him, helplessly.

"It beats me," he said, slowly. "You were keen for it last week. What will Maxine and McGregor think?"

"I suppose they'll be furious."

"I think you're being rather selfish, Sonia, spoiling the weekend for everyone else."

"I know. I admit it looks that way."

"It isn't like you. I can't understand it."

She picked at his coat with nervous fingers. She dared not lift her eyes, she was so ashamed and humiliated. She loathed indecision. She disliked girls who cried. Yet, here she was retracting her acceptance of a weekend; being a killjoy, and weeping over it.

He pressed his cheek against her hair.

"You do want to go, don't you?"

Her lips trembled.

"Yes."

"Then there's only one other thing it could be. You don't trust me. You're afraid I'll take advantage of you. Is that it?"

She shook her head, but her body trembled so violently he must have known he was correct.

After a moment he said, sadly, "I thought you loved me too much to suspect me of forcing you to do anything."

"It isn't you I'm afraid of."

"Who is it, then?"

"Myself," she admitted, "I feel that if I go everything will be spoiled."

His voice was cold as he insisted, "You really are afraid."
Her heart sank at his changed tone.

"I don't suppose I can expect you to understand. I've been stupid with my explanation."

"I understand too well," he replied, dropping his arms.

She swayed closer to him.

"Please don't be angry. I know it's all my fault. Maxine will be furious."

"I'm not angry," he said, rising. "And you'll have to fight it out yourself with Maxine. But it's very unfortunate you couldn't have made up your mind before tonight. Even the food is ready."

She stood before him, abject with misery.

"Couldn't you go without me?"

His lips snapped into a thin line.

"I don't know but I should offer to. It's beastly to let them down like this."

He stood, for a moment, frowning, then he said, "No, I'll be damned if I suggest that. If you call it off, it's off, that's all."

His gaze softened as he looked at her. She was so pitifully unlike Sonia.

"Darling, won't you change your mind? I know you want to go."

She shook her head. His kiss, as he left, was frozen. She clung to him, but felt no warmth in his embrace.

He said, "I shan't ask you again."

"No, I don't expect you to."

Then he was gone, leaving her white with misery. She sat, for a long time in the cold apartment, her eyes swollen from crying. Her head ached. She had disappointed herself and her lover, would presently infuriate Maxine.

"All this," she shuddered, "because I'm being Dad's idea of a nice girl."

CHAPTER XL

SONIA did not know how long she had been sitting in the apartment. But the chilled air began to penetrate the coat she wore and she realized she had not eaten since noon. Maxine might not return until late, so she decided to go out alone. She powdered her nose, and a touch of rouge revived her a little, although the face that stared back from the mirror seemed not to belong to her. It looked so dull and spiritless.

She felt no sense of victory over her refusal to go on the weekend party. Rather it seemed as if her world had come to an abrupt halt. They had planned it for so long.

Although she had hoped to leave the apartment before Maxine arrived, the doorbell rang, announcing her.

"Hello, Kiddie! I gave Franklin my key. Where are you going?"

"Out for something to eat," Sonia explained, adding wearily, "I might as well spill the bad news and have it over with. I've decided not to go tomorrow."

Maxine dropped into a chair.

"You don't mean it? You can't be serious!"

"Never more so," Sonia replied, grimly. "I know exactly what you think about me but go on and say it if it will be any satisfaction."

Maxine's eyes were two blue interrogation points.

"I can't believe it. It isn't the kind of thing you'd pull. Have you quarreled with Franklin?"

"No, although I think he's disgusted with me, now."

"Well, what in the world is it all about?"

Sonia stripped the gloves from her hands, nervously.

"I'm afraid you won't understand."

"I may not be as dumb as I look. Give me a chance at it, anyway."

"It's Daddy," blurted Sonia. "He came up here just to find out what was the matter with me. Been worrying over me

ever since Christmas. He is just pathetic, Maxine. Takes everything so seriously. I know we think it's old fashioned and silly, but it means everything to him."

"Did you tell him you were invited on a party?"

"Certainly not. But don't you suppose I know how he'd feel about it?"

.

Maxine shrugged. Sonia could see that she was beginning to be angry.

"You're the one who's silly. What parents don't know, don't hurt them. I discovered that long ago."

"But your mother isn't living, and perhaps your father is different from mine."

"I'll say he is. I can't imagine my old man hunting me up to spend the day with me. He's married again and it's all he can do to remember which one of the kids I am."

"You see," Sonia cried, eagerly. "My folks are foolish about me. I admit it's ridiculous and all that. But there you are. What am I going to do about it?"

"Put on the old gray bonnet and come with the gang. There's nothing I hate worse than a quitter. If you thought you shouldn't go, you should have decided before now."

"That's true," Sonia agreed, wistfully.

"It certainly is. Besides, Sonia, you're taking this whole thing too seriously. What difference will it make a hundred years from now whether we go tomorrow or not? What do you expect to happen?"

Color flew into Sonia's white cheeks.

"That's just it, I never was on a jaunt like this before. And I wonder."

Maxine eyed her coldly.

"Nothing is going to happen that you don't stand for, you know. It's up to you all the time, in Franklin's shack or right here in this apartment."

Sonia nodded. Hadn't she already proved the truth of that?

"You see," concluded her friend, sagely. "You haven't any argument. You're just scared, that's all. Talking with your father changed your point of view."

"I'll say it did."

"Well, snap out of it now. Go call Franklin and tell him you're ashamed of yourself."

Her tone was too patently wheedling.

"I won't be talked into doing something I've made up my mind not to do," Sonia replied, flatly.

She could see signs of an approaching storm in Maxine's usually placid face but she was not afraid of anger.

"It's no use. I've made up my mind. I'm sorry to be so late doing it, but better late than never. I'll get out tomorrow and you and Mac can have the apartment to yourselves."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know, but somewhere. You're furious and I don't blame you but I'm just about twice as miserable over it as you are. So that's that."

She drew on her gloves, paying no attention to the tears that were streaming down Maxine's cheeks.

"I never would have thought it of you, Sonia."

"Will you call Mac?" Sonia asked, heartlessly.

"I will not. So far as I'm concerned everything's still O. K."

"Suit yourself."

.

Sonia left the apartment, boiling with resentment, chiefly against herself. It was inexcusable for her to have delayed her decision until the night before they were to start.

She walked rapidly, scarcely noticing where she was going. It was dark and misty. Fog horns were croaking dismally. She took a car and rode downtown, then walked up Geary Street to a restaurant where she often ate with Franklin.

She gave her order and ate it without relish. If this was the result of being good, no wonder the nice girls looked dreary. Life had nothing to offer them but evenings alone with a book, or a movie with another girl. She gazed at the tables about her, more than half filled with women or girls without escorts. In spite of their animated chatter, where two or more were together, they looked bored. Their faces were tired and self-centered. . . . Starving for love, concluded Sonia.

Perhaps they, too, had thrown chances away, snapped their fingers at lovers who begged to be allowed to adore them. It was a cruel fate that forced a girl to push away the only thing in life that mattered. No wonder they shriveled up like dried flowers, stiff and crackling with virtue!

Almost in tears over the barren future she imagined confronting her, Sonia paid her check and left. As she passed out

the door Franklin's car drew up to the curb. Genevieve Erickson cuddled beside him.

He said "Good evening!"

She hurried up the street as if he had struck her. She hated the radiant creature in his car. She thought, "She thinks she owns him. She doesn't dream that he is miserable because another girl has turned him down for tomorrow. She wouldn't imagine him even looking at me."

Staring through the car window on the way home, her mind clamored, "But he's mine. She shan't have him."

Back in the apartment she ran to the telephone, without addressing Maxine, who watched her, coldly. She called the restaurant she had just left and asked them to page Mr. Crane.

When he answered her voice sang over the wire, "Do you still want me to go tomorrow?"

"You know I do."

"Then I'll go, dear. I've changed my mind."

CHAPTER XLI

WHEN Sonia turned from the telephone she swung squarely into Maxine's arms.

"Bless your heart, I knew you'd come."

Sonia disengaged herself.

"Don't flatter yourself it was on your account."

"No? Well, I should worry over your reason. I couldn't believe you'd pull anything so raw as not to."

"Perhaps it was raw, backing out at the last moment. Perhaps I'm being an awful fool to go. Be that as it may, nothing can stop me now."

Sonia lifted her hands to her hat, tossing it into a corner. She felt vibrant, exuberant. How silly she had been to give up an innocent pleasure because of the sentimental mood induced by her father's dream and the sign in a church tower.

"You were right, Maxine. I was taking the whole thing too seriously."

Maxine's face was wreathed in smiles.

"Of course! But tell me why you changed your mind."

Sonia frowned. It had hurt to see the other girl sitting beside Franklin. She would never be able to think of them together without feeling stabbed to the heart. But she attempted an explanation.

"There she was, cuddled down beside him as if she owned him. I couldn't stand it. I'll make him so crazy about me he can't stand to be with her. I'll use every weapon I have . . ."

Maxine stared. Sonia's cheeks were flaming. Her green eyes were throwing off brilliant sparks of light.

"Go easy, Kiddie. Too much eagerness can spoil the whole game."

"That from you? When you've acted like a spoiled baby over this weekend trip!"

"I know. I want to go on the party, and it made me sore

for you to call it off. But don't let Franklin know how you feel about it."

"I'll do as I please," declared Sonia, intoxicated by her freedom from the drab, virtuous mood of the early evening. "I'm tired being careful. Every time he kisses me, I spoil it by being cautious. From now on I'm a woman in love—not an old maid preserving her reputation."

Maxine laughed.

"I'm glad he can't see you now. Your reputation wouldn't be worth a darn. But you'll cool off before tomorrow."

Sonia ran to the Victrola, winding it for "Titine." She sang. She danced. Until Maxine, catching the contagion of her wild spirits, danced with her.

"Oh, Maxine, never in my life was I so glad to be alive. He was with her, but he looked so miserable. And you should have heard his voice when I said I'd go. I should worry over anything . . . Oh, darling, he's wonderful."

Maxine's eyes were envious.

"Anyone can tell he's the first man in your life. Do you know you've admitted more to me in one hour tonight than in all the months we've lived together?"

"I don't care. Let's get our bags packed. We won't have much time tomorrow."

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They packed with many jokes over the prospects of the next day. Maxine carefully removed the price tag from the new rose negligee. They retired early.

"Must have our beauty sleep tonight," cried Sonia, remembering how Franklin had whispered, "I should like to hold you in my arms one whole night long and see the sun rise over Tamalpais."

Excitement ran like fire through every vein. She lay quiet, but she was awake. She wondered if the weekend could possibly mean as much to Maxine as it did to her. Once she whispered, "Are you asleep?"

"No."

"It's getting awfully late."

Maxine's amused chuckle rippled through the darkness.

"Years to sleep in, Sonia, but only one night like this . . ."

They were up on time the next morning. It was easy to rise to the adventures of that day. Sonia wore the new sweater

under her coat. They would not have time to change their clothes when they came home.

The day was clear and sunny, following weeks of fog and cold. A wonderful day for a ride, although Sonia would have preferred going in the rain because Franklin had said he liked it.

He came to her desk as soon as he came to the office.

He whispered, "I almost shouted for joy when you called me last night."

"Were you glad? Really?"

Her voice dripped with sweetness.

"I wanted to tell the whole café. To yell, 'Sonia Marsh is going up to my shack tomorrow.'"

"That would have been dandy," she smiled. "I'm sure your fiancée would have appreciated it."

"Don't call her my fiancée. Sonia."

"But that's what she is."

"A good friend comes nearer describing Genevieve."

Sonia would never believe that after seeing them together, but she answered, softly, "I don't care what she is. Why should I?"

His blue eyes burned into hers.

"When you talk like that I could kiss you in front of the whole real estate office."

"Don't waste kisses on the real estate office," she whispered. "Keep them until tonight."

She was leading him on deliberately. She thrilled with the joy of seeing his face darken with passion. She told herself she had held back too long. No wonder he had become irritable. No man liked to be kept at arm's length, indefinitely.

Her mind was as clear as the sunny morning. She had swept it clean of all the doubts of the night before. Her father's face was a blur before the reality of her lover's lips. She would do nothing that was not inspired by love. And their love was as pure as a white hot flame.

At ten o'clock Maxine whispered, "Only two more hours." Sonia smiled.

"Have you heard from Mac?"

"He called a little while ago. Everything is all set. He'll meet us at the apartment."

Violet, always interested in the other girl's plans, inquired, "What are you doing over the weekend?"

"Maxine and I are invited over in Marin County."

"That so? I have an uncle who has a cabin on Manor Heights."

Sonia's face became blank. Could Violet possibly know the location of Franklin's cottage?

"We're going to Mill Valley," she lied. "Some friends of Maxine's."

Violet smiled. A wise, red-lipped grimace:

"'S all right with me, girlie! I'm for you. Have a good time."

What did she mean by that? It was too late to retract her previous statement, but Sonia replied carelessly. "Thanks! Why so big-hearted?"

"It's my nature. You see, Maxine just told me that you were both driving to her aunt's in San Rafael."

Sonia was annoyed, but said nothing.

"I see Franklin Crane has his mother's big car this morning," Violet continued, joyfully. "But I imagine he's going over to a grandfather's in Baltimore Park. Gee, I'll bet it will be a swell party."

CHAPTER XLII

Not even Violet's suspicions could quell Sonia. She smiled serenely and returned to her bookkeeping. Violet was guessing, she decided. She really knew nothing.

When noon finally came, Sonia ran to the dressing room with Maxine and they had seized hats and coats before the other girls had finished with their lipsticks. Franklin was to come to the apartment for them. They had all agreed that it was best not to leave from the office. He was sitting at his desk as the girls left and Sonia sent him a demure little smile.

Mac was waiting at the apartment. He did not share their high spirits.

"I had the devil of a time getting away," he complained. "We should have gone last week."

Maxine's face fell.

"I suppose you're getting ready to imply that you can't have so many nights off."

"My dear girl," he replied, testily, "I've given you nearly all of them up to date. A man owes something to his family."

To hear Mac discoursing about the rights of his family on the verge of departing for a weekend with Maxine, was too much for Sonia. She laughed until tears stood in her eyes.

"Nothing funny about it that I can see," sighed Maxine.

"No, darling, you couldn't. But it's delicious. . . ."

Mac eyed her disdainfully. He was one of the few men who appeared to be untroubled by Sonia's charm.

"Where's Crane?" he demanded.

"Coming," explained Sonia. "He ought to be here any time."

Mac drew a bottle from his Gladstone bag.

"Let's have a little drink before we start."

Maxine brought glasses.

"Shall we wait for Franklin?"

"No," Sonia said, quickly.

If the rumors about him were only half true, he should not be encouraged.

The three tossed off tiny glasses of Bourbon. It burned Sonia's throat and ran like liquid fire into her blood.

"Where is that sweetie of yours, Sonia?" Mac was becoming more jovial. "Call him up. We ought to get started."

"He'll come when he's ready," she objected.

The girls took off their hats and put them on again. They played record after record on the victrola. But Franklin did not come. Mac became unpleasant about it.

"Helluva way to act. Invite friends on a party and not show up."

"He'll be here," Sonia insisted. "There's no hurry, is there?"

"There are a lot of things I could have done if I had known we weren't going to go until tonight."

Maxine said nothing, but her face came anxious as the minutes dragged by and Franklin did not appear.

At 2 o'clock Sonia said, "Perhaps he misunderstood the hour."

"He couldn't have, Sonia. He said himself that we'd go as soon as we could get here from the office."

"Something's detaining him, then."

She would not admit the delay to be his fault. But when the clock struck the half hour she became uneasy.

"I'm not going to stand for this," Mac said, irritably. "Call him up. If he's not coming, I'm off."

Maxine's eyes were full of tears. Her hands were fluttering with nervousness. But Sonia answered, scornfully, "I'll call him, but he probably won't be there."

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She was correct. There was no answer. They were staring at each other uncertainly when the doorbell rang and Franklin entered.

"Hello, soaks! Everybody ready?"

"Everybody's been waiting on you since twelve-thirty."

"Is that so? I'm awfully sorry. New contract held me up at the last minute. Couldn't get away."

"That's obvious," retorted Mr. McGregor.

Franklin laughed.

"Don't get on your ear, big boy. Sonia, come here. Aren't you going to kiss your papa?"

She approached him, smiling with relief at his presence. But when she lifted her lips to his, she perceived that he had been drinking. Her eyes met Maxine's. And she knew that her friend had already suspected it. She turned away, intensely disappointed.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?"

"Nothing. Come on, let's get started."

But Franklin had spied the half-emptied bottle upon the table.

"So this is the way you've whiled away the hours?" he cried, joyfully. "Come on, Mac. Give us a drink."

Maxine and Sonia refused, but the two men drank, following one glass with another until the bottle was empty. And with each drink Franklin's spirits rose higher.

"I'm so happy I could sing."

"Well, don't try it," advised Maxine. "Take it out in driving instead."

"A good idea, my girl. Let's go!"

At last, after all postponements, they were running to Franklin's car, piling in baggage. Maxine and Mac jumped in while Franklin lifted Sonia high in his arms, dropping her into the front seat.

"I love you," he whispered, pressing the hand that lay nearest him.

She smiled at him, dizzily. She had been hurt when she realized that he had been drinking. But she could not resist his pleading eyes.

He grasped the wheel and they were down the hill with a speed that made them gasp. Off like a streak until they came to traffic which compelled him to drive slowly. Then, crowded upon the ferry, with dozens of other parties crossing for the weekend.

Sonia was delighted. She sat beside her lover with the face of a happy child. It was thrilling to be leaving San Francisco for two days with Franklin. Safe against interruptions. Once they had arrived at their destination, Maxine and Mac would not bother them.

"Just to think," she said, softly. "I almost missed this."

"Why did you change your mind?"

She smiled mysteriously.

"Aren't you glad I did change it?"

His eyes, a bit inflamed now, swept over her, possessively.

"Oh God, you're sweet."

She could not meet the passionate ardor of his gaze. She looked away but the cars lined in front of them blurred. Then she felt the boat pushing from the slip. Her heart gave a frightened leap. She was irrevocably committed to the adventure now. If only he had come to her without drinking! Her kisses should have been stimulation enough.

She asked in a low voice that could not be overheard, "Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Take something to drink before you came?"

He grinned at her like a naughty schoolboy.

"You had something to drink without me, didn't you."

"Not very much. And we were waiting for you."

He moved his arm until it pressed lightly against her shoulder.

"Darling, I didn't have much either. A customer offered it to me. I couldn't refuse."

She did not reply.

"Sonia," he asked, anxiously, "you aren't going to be angry with me?"

Even her disappointment melted before the eager penitence of his tone.

"No," she answered. "Nothing can make me angry with you today."

CHAPTER XLIII

THE boat pushed in to Sausalito. Cars rolled out. Franklin made for the highway with a speed that shot them far ahead. The windows of the car were down and the cold, fresh air whistled about their ears.

Sonia wanted to go fast. The faster the better! She wished they had been in an airplane and could swoop down to the little shack on Manor Heights. But Maxine shouted repeated warnings from the back seat.

"Not so fast, Franklin. Please don't go so fast."

"Who's going fast?" he retorted. "This is nothing, woman. You ought to ride with me when I really speed."

It was true. Sonia had been with him when he had made the car zigzag across mountain roads, stopping on the very edge.

"He's being good today," she called, reassuringly.

Maxine was cuddled in Mac's arms. Her hat was off and her blonde head snuggled beneath his firm chin.

"She's not so worried," Sonia chuckled to Franklin. "I love to drive like this. And I've never been over this road before. Isn't the view beautiful? As if it had been painted for our especial benefit!"

They were going up the Corte Madera grade, around a curve. Franklin, blue eyes straight ahead, stepped on the gas. As if impelled by a monster, the car leaped into the air. . . .

Some one was screaming. Shrill, piercing cries that began a long way off then hurtled through the air, tearing Sonia's heart. She could not endure the agony of listening to them.

"Oh, stop! Stop!" she moaned.

"My God, Sonia, don't scream like that."

So it was her own voice. She lay, shuddering, fearing to hear it again. Then she felt herself being lifted. The darkness was suffocating her.

"Better keep her head down," advised some one.

After a time the black, swimming clouds parted a little. She saw Franklin's face floating above her. It was terrified.

"Are you hurt?"

She smiled, wondering why he should have asked.

Then waves of sickening, nauseating faintness engulfed her. She was a paper, tortured by the wind; a leaf swept on a furious stream; a little girl and her mother was washing her face.

She sat up, pushing at the hands that would have held her. It was still late afternoon. The sun was shining. The beauty of the landscape was undimmed. But far beneath the road where she lay she saw a broken, twisted mass.

She shivered.

"Franklin?"

"Yes, Sonia."

"Oh, you're not hurt, Franklin?"

"No," he groaned.

But his face was livid. Mac, beside him, had buried his head in his hands. Then she saw two men, moving slowly, carrying something limp and soaked with blood.

The world reeled. She pitched headlong back into the pit from which she had so painfully withdrawn. But she fought to climb out of it. There was something she must find out. Some one . . . but she couldn't remember the name.

When her vision cleared again she demanded, bluntly, "Was that Maxine?"

Their stricken faces answered her.

"But she can't be dead," whimpered Sonia. "She was cuddled up in Mac's arms just a moment ago."

People couldn't be wiped out like that. Smashed as if they were an insect! Tears of furious resentment gathered in her eyes. It wasn't fair. God shouldn't let things like this happen. But no God could endure watching an automobile roll over the side of a mountain. Bumping from side to side, crashing into the sickening heap out of which they had carried Maxine.

She stared at Franklin. His face was white and unfamiliar. His lips were trembling like a frightened little boy's.

"Are you sure," she faltered. "Sure about Maxine?"

He nodded.

"They've sent for an ambulance. You'll have to go to a hospital."

"But why will I? I'm not hurt."

She heard Mac's voice, taut with emotion and something which sounded like fear.

"We must keep my name out of this."

"But, good God, these men have already seen you."

"They don't know my name. I'll give them another."

He wrung his hands. "This is terrible. It will ruin me if it gets out."

Sonia shuddered. How could Mac be thinking of his reputation, so near the accusing, broken body of the girl he had loved?

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She was powerless to stop them.

Franklin groaned. "Don't cry, Sonia. It's all my fault. I must have been crazy."

"No," she sobbed. "I begged you to go faster. I didn't know it was dangerous. . . ."

Oh, God, the awful stillness of Maxine. . . .

It seemed hours before the ambulance came, hours during which Sonia tossed in a sea of regret!

Why had she come? Every instinct had warned her not to. If she had listened to her father! If she had heeded the sign in the tower of St. Mary's!

"Observe the time and fly from evil!"

But it was too late now! Too late to save Maxine, who had cried a week ago because the party had been postponed. Sonia remembered her words when they started to work on Monday, "How can I ever stand the unending monotony of another week?" It was ended now. Cut off as if it had never been.

Sonia shook, uncontrollably. The future terrified her. She would never feel safe again. Tragedy had come swooping on her out of a clear sky. She would never be able to force herself to another decision of any kind.

Then she saw the gray ambulance rolling down upon them. It might as easily be the hearse to carry her away. For one sick, guilty moment she wished it were. No more problems to meet. No more temptations which could produce such unexpected, portentous results.

She shook her head, obstinately, when they approached with a stretcher. She was not going to a hospital. She was able to walk. She staggered up from the ground and started off, dizzily, then something in her tortured brain snapped. She

felt herself crumpling into a deep, soft unconsciousness.

Pain, pulling at her nerves like hundreds of tiny wires, forced her back. She was lying in a white, narrow bed. Strange faces were about her. Strange voices in her ears! Not one soul she knew! She could not endure the aching loneliness. She felt that she would sink into a bottomless pit if some one did not hold out a familiar hand. Whose hand was it that was so comforting? So strong that it could hold her firmly on the very verge of dissolution? She began to mutter between set teeth.

"What is it?" asked a nurse leaning over the bed.

Sonia closed her eyes and repeated over and over, "Dr. Don Stillwater! Send for Dr. Don Stillwater," adding his uncle's telephone number, which she had called on Saturday night, a week ago.

CHAPTER XLIV

AT the sound of Don Stillwater's name Sonia felt reassured. He would straighten this tangled snarl she had gotten into. She fell back upon her pillows as if she had already shifted her burden to his broad shoulders. Almost immediately she fell asleep.

She woke to darkness and the comfort of his gentle hand.

"Don?" she whispered, even before she had opened her eyes.

"Guess, Sonia."

"Oh," she cried, blinking up at him. "I wanted you so badly. Did you come right away?"

"The moment they telephoned me."

She lay quietly, trying to gather strength to tell him everything.

"Maxine's dead. . . ."

"I know."

At the awful memory of the scene on the mountain road, she began to cry again.

"Try not to think of it. It can't be helped now."

"But I wanted to go fast."

"You weren't to blame, dear. Go to sleep, if you can. We'll talk about it some other time."

Slow, painful tears were rolling down her cheeks.

"Am I hurt badly?"

"Only bruised, Sonia. It's been a severe shock."

"That's the reason I feel so queer and all to pieces?"

"Yes, you'll be all right in a few days."

His voice was soothing as if he were speaking to a child. She wrapped her fingers tightly about his. Only his touch kept her from screaming as she had in the afternoon. She must have something firm to cling to. Swirling waters seemed to be sweeping over her, his hand the one chance of rescue!

.
"Don, you're so strong."

He smiled, sadly.

"I wish I might have saved you from this, Sonia."

After a moment she faltered, "Do you know where we were going?"

"It isn't necessary for me to know."

Her face was drawn with pain.

"But I want you to understand how reckless I really am . . ."

"Don't tell me, dear. I'm sure you wouldn't have done anything wrong. But you've been playing with fire."

She remembered how she had boasted to Walter Henderson that she wanted to burn her fingers. She had not dreamed that the attempt would involve Maxine.

"That's the trouble," she moaned. "You think it's only yourself who will be affected, but it may hurt any number of other people."

"That's it, exactly, Sonia. No one is free to do absolutely as he pleases."

Her eyes stared into his kind face.

"We were going to Franklin's shack on Manor Heights for the weekend."

His clasp did not weaken.

"The four of you?"

"Yes, it would have been better if I had gone alone."

"Don't say that. There is justice in everything, even if we can't see it."

"But I knew I shouldn't go. I went, deliberately, with my eyes open."

Then he asked her a question which seemed to be forced from his quiet lips.

"Are you engaged to this chap, Sonia?"

"Oh, no!"

"Do you expect to be?"

In despair she replied, "I did at one time."

"You would like to be?" he persisted.

"I don't know," she faltered. "He isn't what I thought him at first!"

"I can see you love him. . . ."

But she would not admit so much. No one but Maxine had known the extent of her love for Franklin. She determined that no one else should ever know.

"Don," she cried, trying desperately to keep from trembling,

"I'm so frightened I don't know what to do. I wouldn't have believed anything like this could happen."

"Happens every day, Sonia."

"But it seems so much worse when it's some one you know. I'll never be the same again. I'm sick of thrills and excitement." Her eyes were wide with fear. "I feel as if I can never decide anything for myself again."

He patted her shoulder.

"That will pass, Sonia. Try to rest."

"But I can't," she wailed. "When I shut my eyes I feel the car jumping into the air. I can see them carrying her. . . ."

"Sonia, please. . . ."

"It's no use," she sobbed. "I'll never be able to forget."

.
A nurse entered. She turned the switch beside the door, flooding the room with sickly green light.

"Are you feeling better, now?" she asked, ignoring Sonia's tears.

Her impersonal, professional manner froze Sonia's grief. She waited until she had left the room then she whispered, "I'll have to get away from here. I can't stand being treated as if I were sick when there's nothing the matter with me."

"You may go," he soothed, "as soon as possible. You're upset more than you realize. But you won't have to stay long."

A probationer entered with a box of thick stemmed roses. She turned back the paper and disclosed a mass of fragrant, crimson blossoms. Then she put an envelope in Sonia's hand. Inside was Walter Henderson's card, with his thoughtful message, inscribed carefully across the top.

"I'm so sorry, Sonia. Let me know if I can help."

"Everyone is so good to me," she said, letting the card fall from her nerveless grasp.

"Everyone loves you, Sonia," Don answered, smiling. "By the way, shouldn't I call your mother? She might see the papers. . . ."

Sonia sat up.

"This won't be in the papers?"

"It will be very difficult to keep it out."

So that was the reason Mac had insisted on giving an assumed name.

Don smiled again but his face was sorrowful, "No one will know where you were going, Sonia."

She was instantly relieved.

"Perhaps you had better call mother. Be sure to talk to her—not father. He'd be so excited he wouldn't understand."

Don nodded.

"Just explain that we were out for a ride and Maxine was killed. . . ." Her lips trembled. "Don't let them think they ought to come up. Tell them I'm all right. Will you do that?"

"Yes, if you'll try to sleep. I'll leave a powder for you."

He called the nurse and gave a few directions. Sonia was not to be disturbed.

"Not to see anyone," he ordered, emphatically.

"Yes, doctor."

Sonia was indifferent even if those restrictions included Franklin. She was not ready to see him yet. There were a great many things to be considered before she saw him again.

She swallowed the powder the little nurse brought to her. Don had promised to return early in the morning. Until then she would endeavor not to think. But try as she might she was not able to push the tragedy from her mind.

The piercing screams which had proved to be her own. . . . Franklin's ragged voice, his lips trembling, as he stared at Maxine's bloodstained body. . . .

Time after time she was roused from the verge of sleep to feel the car pitching over the embankment.

Time after time she was reassured by the little nurse, "Don't cry, Miss Marsh. It's all over now."

But was it? For Maxine in the San Francisco morgue, it was indeed over. No more scenes with Mac. No more desire for romance or adventure! It was all over. But for Sonia, bruised and tortured by remembrance, there might be years ahead.

Sonia lacked the strength to face those years.

Her self-confidence had been shattered. She was afraid.

CHAPTER XLV

DAY was breaking when Sonia opened her eyes. She looked for Maxine's blonde braid on the pillow beside her. And realized, with sweeping bitterness, that she would never see it again.

It was the morning she had hoped to see the sun rise over Tamalpais. Where was Franklin? Was he, too, sleepless with remorse, facing a gray dawn? And Mac? Sonia shuddered. She pictured him, more considerate than usual, a model husband, spending Sunday with his family. How furtively he would scan the morning papers for an account of the accident! While Maxine lay dead, accusing but forever silent!

"It isn't fair," thought Sonia bitterly.

She lay listening to the sounds about her. The padded noises of a hospital! The subdued clang of elevators, smothered bits of conversation, smooth-rolling rubber-tired carts—all the business pertaining to illness and death! Emotionless save for the frantic grieving of some novice at suffering, called upon to face bereavement for the first time.

.
A nurse entered for early temperatures. Her professional cheerfulness grated upon Sonia. Later came an unappetizing tray. Sonia drank the hot coffee and pushed it aside.

The conviction grew upon her that she must get away. She would be really ill if she were forced to remain.

Long before time for Don to return she began watching the door, listening for steps which might be his. The wrist watch Franklin had given her had been shattered in the accident. She was compelled to guess at the hour.

When his lean, dark figure appeared she could have cried with relief.

"How are you, Sonia?"

"I'm all right. Only I can't endure staying here. Please, Don, make them let me go home."

He held her wrist, counting the pulse, which she could feel hammering with unusual rapidity. When he had finished she held his hand, pleadingly, over hers.

"Don't leave me here any longer. I'll be ever so much better if I can get up. It's lying here makes me so nervous."

"It's the shock that has made you nervous," he corrected, gently. "I think you can leave tomorrow. Where will you go?"

For the first time it occurred to her that she must return to rooms haunted with Maxine.

"I can't go to the apartment."

"Don't you think you had better go home for a little while?"

Bewildered as she undoubtedly was, his question astounded her.

"Back to Stockton?"

"Back to your mother and father."

But she refused.

"They'd drive me mad with questions. How did it happen, what were we doing out with these men, etc."

He smiled at her, wistfully.

"You haven't had enough excitement yet?"

"I never want another thrill as long as I live," she said petulantly. "But neither can I endure the life at home."

He said then: "Your sister, Vera, has another baby. A boy this time."

"I'm glad it's over. You talked with mother?"

"Yes. I tried not to alarm her. And I promised you would call her yourself tomorrow."

"That's fine. You're such a peace. You remember I told you I'd call on you if I got into trouble?"

"I remember . . ."

"I didn't dream I'd have to call so soon."

She saw the color mounting in his cheeks.

"Sonia, if you're feeling up to it, I'd like to talk to you."

Her smile was mirthless.

"You mean preach."

"No, indeed," he replied, with decision. "I have nothing to preach about. This is as much my fault as yours."

Her green eyes widened with surprise.

"I fail to see where you come into the picture at all, Don."

"Well, I do. It was I who insisted upon your coming to San Francisco."

"I had decided to come long before you suggested it."

"Perhaps you had, but how much chance did you have of coming without the position I hastened to secure for you? Without my rather impertinent interceding with your parents?"

His voice was so bitter she did not attempt to reply.

"I felt like a dog calling them up to tell them you had been in an accident. I meant well, but I was all wrong. You should have stayed at home."

"Don't think for a moment that I would. Eventually I would have reached San Francisco without anyone's help."

Don was frowning.

"You're too young. My idea was to get you away from Stockton. But it was a mistake. Whatever has happened I am partly responsible for it."

Sonia half rose to her flat, smooth pillows.

"It's ridiculous of you to feel that way. I'll shoulder the blame for my own mistakes, thank you. Besides, what can either of us do about it now?"

His brown eyes stared at her hungrily, as if they were begging more than his lips could voice.

"You laughed at me Sunday and I swore I'd never mention it again, but every resolution I'd made was jarred by this accident. Sonia, it might have been you. Won't you tell me if you love me now?"

She was touched by the honest passion of his words. Yet he would have gone away without seeing her again. He had come only because she had sent for him. Oh, but he was strong. Unbreakable. Like a stone wall!

"Won't you answer me?"

She sighed.

"What can I say? I think you are the best man I ever knew."

"But you don't love me?"

She could not bring herself to an open denial. She was surprised to find so much affection pleading for him.

"Supposing I do?" she faltered.

Light swept over his countenance lending it a sudden, magnetic beauty.

"If you do, honey, our problem is all solved."

"How do you mean?"

He held her fluttering, restless hands in both of his.

"You can go to Berlin with me. You need never face anything alone again."

.
She wanted to do it. She longed to put her tortured, aching heart beyond the reach of further wounds. Don could protect her. He could keep things from hurting. But Franklin's sweet, reproachful eyes, his lips, hurt and wistful, pushed between them.

"I wish I could," she said. "But I'm afraid it might not be fair."

"Why wouldn't it?"

"I'm still young and silly, you know. I should be sure to get into trouble of some kind."

"I wouldn't give you a chance."

"I don't feel as if I would ever take another chance of any kind," she admitted. "But, oh, Don, I can't promise. I wish you'd decide it for me. Why don't you make me marry you? It would be the best thing that ever happened to me."

He answered grimly: "I'm no cave man, Sonia. If you marry me it will have to be because you want to."

But the idea of making another decision frightened her. She was still so weak. So shattered mentally! As if her will had been broken into bits.

When he rose to leave her she clung to him, crying, "Don't go!"

"I must, honey, I'll be back tomorrow."

"May I leave then?"

"Yes, and in the meantime you must make up your mind where you want to go."

"But I can't go back to the apartment. . . ."

He was very patient with her.

"That's nerves, dear. But my advice is for you to go home."

CHAPTER XLVI

TEARS rolled down Sonia's cheeks when Don had gone. She felt that she would never do anything but cry again. She could see no solution to any of the problems confronting her. It seemed equally impossible to go home or back to the empty apartment. In any case, she could not afford to keep it after the first of the month.

The door was pushed softly open by the probationer who had brought Henderson's flowers the night before.

"Would you like to see Mr. Crane?"

His anxious face loomed over the nurse's shoulder.

Sonia cried, "Oh, Franklin!"

He was kneeling beside the bed, kissing her hands. The little nurse left the room.

"Darling, what can I ever do? What can I say?"

"It's all right," she said, instantly brave again. "We were both to blame."

Her hand caressed his bowed head.

"Was it in the papers?"

"Only a brief account. I kept it from mother."

"You did?"

"Yes, although I had to tell her the car had been wrecked."

"Where does she think you were?"

"With some fellows, who were going up to the shack. A rotten business, Sonia."

After a little she forced herself to ask about Maxine. They were sending her body to her father in Seattle.

After Don's rugged steadfastness there seemed an instability about Franklin. Sonia resented the comparison even while she was making it. His nervous system was no doubt shaken as much as her own. Yet the idea persisted. His charming face looked weak. She had not noticed before the petulant, fretful droop of his lips. She hated herself for noticing it now.

"Franklin," she asked suddenly, "how much chance is there of our getting married?"

His blue eyes became cold.

"Haven't I enough to worry me without bringing in that?"

"Is the idea so distasteful to you?"

"It's impossible," he said, flatly. "I'm going to have all I can do to weather the effects of this accident."

"It's always been impossible, hasn't it? You never have had any definite idea of marriage in your mind?"

He faced her resentfully.

"I've been frank with you from the start. As long as conditions are as they are . . . Oh, Sonia, don't torment me. I'm just about crazy."

"I see. It torments you to discuss our marriage."

"It does because there's nothing I can do about it. I'd marry you in a minute if I could."

"That's good of you."

Her voice was brittle.

He rose and began to pace the room.

"You don't seem to realize that the delay hurts me as much as it does you."

Sonia remained silent.

"I want you, Sonia, more than I ever wanted anything."

"But so far as doing anything about it is concerned, I can wither up and die!" she said bitterly.

"Why should you? I spend every minute with you I can. Good Lord, you're only eighteen."

"Just the same, I'm passing up the best opportunities I'll ever have for respectable marriage."

"Respectable?" His laugh jangled in the quiet room. "A new word for Sonia!"

"I've begun to like it," she retorted. "Lying here, thinking things over, makes it seem rather a desirable condition."

"That's because you've had a shock."

"I'm not so sure." She added, positively, "At any rate, I never want to be in a situation like this again."

"I hope you aren't. Although as a matter of fact, the accident might have happened on our way to church to be married."

"In that case it would have been much easier to explain."

"Are you blaming me for it? Trying to pass the buck? Because if that's your idea, I can stand it. I told you it was my fault."

At the implication of his words, color flashed to her eyes.

"You make me utterly ashamed. I'm blaming no one."

Then he ran back to kiss her wildly and cry. "We musn't quarrel like this. It's because we're both half mad from all that has happened."

She agreed, adding sadly, "I certainly would never have thought anything would make me urge a man to marry me."

"You didn't, dear. I understand exactly how sick and frightened you are."

His eyes fell upon the crimson roses.

"I suppose Henderson's been after you again?"

She shook her head but sobs were breaking in her throat.

Franklin touched the card which lay upon the table.

"So he would like to help, would he? Well, he'd better leave you alone, Sonia."

"Why should he? You don't love me."

In the midst of his protestations the nurse entered.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he stammered, and went away.

Sonia permitted him to go without telling him that she was leaving the next day. Some instinct for secrecy seemed to warn her for the first time in her relations with him. Let him come and find her gone. She did not know herself where she would be. But Don would take care of her. Don, who never in his life could have addressed any woman as Franklin had spoken to her.

She told herself that she had been a weak fool even to mention the subject of marriage. She was not even sure that she wanted to marry him. He would not make a good husband. Good husband, respectable marriage! He had laughed at her choice of words, but at least a girl was sheltered in marriage. Married women were not subject to temptations that were so hard to resist.

Franklin did not wish to be annoyed by thoughts of the future. But Don stood ready to give her his strong hand for the rest of his life. And she needed strength! Firmness of character and stability! He was finer, too, than either Crane or Walter Henderson, although she would never consider Henderson since Maxine had died—Maxine, whom he had taught to love.

Franklin had upset Sonia. She was far more miserable than she had been before he came. Every muscle in her body ached.

She was tired, disillusioned and humiliated. She had asked for comfort and he had given her only pain. Was it not typical?

She told herself that she was ready now to make one last decision. She forced herself to it. Then, feverishly, she waited Don's return.

CHAPTER XLVII

WHEN Don opened the door of Sonia's room Monday, he was surprised to find her sitting very straight in the narrow hospital bed. Her hair was smoothed into its customary boyish sleekness. Her pale cheeks flaunted two round spots of rouge.

"I do believe she's all ready to go home."

"They wouldn't let me dress," cried Sonia, pulling at the coarse gown.

"You look like a scared little boy." Don sat by the side of the bed. "Have you decided what you want to do?"

"I have."

Something in her tone made him ask, uneasily, "You will go home for a while?"

"No. And I don't want to go to the apartment."

His weary smile touched her.

"What is it, Sonia? I see you've quite made up your mind."

"Oh, I hope you won't disapprove of it. Don, did you really mean what you said about getting married?"

His eyes blazed.

"Did I mean it? Of course, I did."

"Would you . . . ?" She was plaiting the counterpane with tense, precise, fingers. "Would you marry me today? This afternoon? So that I won't have time to change my mind?"

"Why should you change your mind, Sonia? If you love me . . . But you don't. Do you think I can't tell? Don't you know I wouldn't take you that way? It wouldn't be fair."

"Maybe it wouldn't be fair to you," she begged. "Maybe I don't exactly love you the way I should a husband. But you're the sort of man I ought to marry. You have everything I need. And I will love you, Don. I'm sure I will if you give me time."

"There's no use, Sonia. I can't do it."

"Then you don't care. If you did, you'd be willing to take a chance."

"That has nothing to do with it. You're too young. It would not be fair to you."

.

"It would be the best thing in the world for me. I've gotten into complications. There are temptations I'm afraid I can't resist."

"You love Franklin Crane?"

"Yes," she confessed. "I do love him. But he is engaged to another girl, and has no intention of marrying me. I don't know that I want him to. He drinks—was drinking Saturday. And he can be cruel." Her vision blurred. "He isn't the husband I'd choose if I were in my right mind."

"But Sonia. . . ."

"Oh, I know. It's the sweetness of his mouth—the way he kisses me. . . . Physical things! He fascinates me, Don. I can't trust myself with him. But if I could get away. If I could go to Berlin. . . ."

Don was white to the lips.

"Do you think I would take you? When you admit you are in love with some one else?"

"I thought you might—if you loved me enough."

"Well, I don't love you that way."

"Oh, I'm sorry. It was a nervy thing for me to suggest, wasn't it?"

.

Slumping into the pillows, Sonia burst into tears.

He came to her and gathered her up in kind arms.

"Don't cry about it, honey. Can't you see how you'd hate me? Wearing my name, tied to a man you don't care for?"

"But I do. I adore you. This other thing is like a fever. It's in my blood. Why won't you help me as you would if it were a real disease? I'm so tired of fighting it alone. I don't sleep. You can see how thin I am."

"Do you really believe it is only a temporary madness, Sonia? That back of it all is a lasting affection for me?"

"I am on the verge of loving you now. My mind loves you."

But memories of the oblivion she found in Franklin's arms took away her breath.

"You see. Even the thought of him is too much."

"Even the thought of him hurts," she insisted. "He was here yesterday and he said things I can never forgive. He doesn't love the real me, either. It's my lips and my body he loves."

Suddenly she laid her cheek against his hand.

"Won't you please marry me—or is it the responsibility that worries you?"

"It isn't that at all."

"I am so frightened. So sick of life. You were right when you said there are experiences that sear the soul. This has been one of them. I'm through. I don't want any more. I don't want to go any deeper into things as I know I will. . . . Save me, Don. Please!"

"Are you sure you wish to be saved?"

She brushed the tears from her eyes, laughing hysterically.

"Oh, I do! But you must do it today. Can you get a license? Can we be married very quietly?"

"Those things could be arranged. That's the simplest part of it. But why the secrecy, Sonia? I will have to tell my mother."

"You can ask her not to say anything about it until we are gone." She smiled like a flash of her old self. "I will tell my family, too. They will be very happy."

"If only I were sure that you wouldn't regret it . . ."

"Even if I do regret it, I'll know it was the right thing to do. You are so safe. So big and strong! I wish you'd take me and never, never let me go."

The blood rushed into his face. He leaned over and took her in his arms.

"I love you so much, Sonia. But supposing you're sorry tomorrow?"

"I expect I will be," she admitted. "It may be a tiresome experiment."

"It won't be tiresome so long as you aren't unhappy. You know I would never consent to this if I didn't think what you say is true. You are the type of girl who gets into trouble if she isn't married young. You need me, Sonia, and I believe in a little corner of your heart you must love me or you could not have suggested this plan."

"That's what I think."

He smiled.

"Otherwise you may be sure all your arguments would not have one particle of weight with me."

She snuggled closer to him. He was the link binding her to sanity. To the wholesome, normal life which was all she felt she would ever desire.

"But if you find you can't love me—can't love me with all your heart—will you be frank about it? Don't lie to me, ever. I could not forgive you for that. Don't cheat or pretend you like to be in my arms, when you're longing for Franklin Crane. I demand that one thing of you. Promise on your honor."

"I promise not to lie to you ever," she said, solemnly. "And will not pretend. If I can't love you as you wish at the end of the year, we'll give it up."

He kissed her tenderly as a father might have kissed her.

"I have implicit faith in you, honey. God willing, you'll come to me before the year is up, offering your whole heart. But I can never accept anything less."

Four hours later a white-faced Sonia was taking her marriage vows.

CHAPTER XLVIII

SONIA felt no inward perturbation. Her mind was like a quiet pool, reflecting the scene about it. The little old minister, a stranger to both of them, who peered from one to the other over old-fashioned, gold-rimmed spectacles. His wife, obviously not thrilled at the witnessing of another wedding ceremony, and a neighbor, brimming with the romance she was sure the bride must be feeling.

"I always cry at weddings," she explained, drying her eyes. Hers were the only tears shed.

All during the ceremony Sonia had thought, "Soon it will be over. Then I'll have nothing more to worry about."

Don's strong, supple fingers held hers confidently. She could feel courage streaming into her tired nerves. . . . Then it was over, and Don was kissing her on the lips. That kiss was a surprise. She had not expected it. And it startled her out of her peaceful dreaming. In spite of her effort, color surged into her cheeks. But he did not seem to notice. He was talking with the minister. No doubt the kiss was necessary. A part of the ceremony! But deep in her heart she felt a stirring uneasiness. There had been more than fatherly affection in that kiss. . . .

When they had left the parsonage and driven away, he said, "Say where, Sonia. Shall we drive around for a bit?"

But she was too nervous to ride. The slightest noise terrified her. She asked to go at once to the apartment and pack her clothes.

How glad she was that Don was with her when they entered. To face the disturbingly familiar sight of Maxine's blue bathrobe, hanging behind the door. Her faded satin mules, kicked under a chair. The pathos of these inanimate belongings rent Sonia's heart. But she set her lips grimly.

"What shall I do about Maxine's things?"

"You'd better pack them up some day and send them to her father."

"He didn't care for her. She told me herself that he could scarcely remember which one of the children she was."

"It's all you can do, honey. Uncle Jed tells me she had a little money in the bank. Enough to pay for sending her home."

Oh, the tragedy of it! The needless tragedy, thought Sonia. She would come some day and put all these things away. Shoes, hats, frail vanities, which had possessed so much more endurance than the living girl who owned them.

She found a half-used bottle of talcum on the bathroom shelf. Maxine's bath salts. . . .

Sonia threw her clothes into the trunk she had brought from Stockton. She felt she could not endure staying in this room. It was full of ghosts. And not only Maxine's. Franklin Crane's blue eyes peered, reproachfully, from the corner near the fireplace. She had sat there, hours at a time, in his arms.

She turned to Don, almost violently.

"Let's get out of here. I can't stand it."

He had the wisdom to make no reply. He asked no questions.

.

When they reached the small hotel where they were to stay, she found that he had been thoughtful enough to order two rooms, connected by a bath. There were yellow roses on her dressing table, another great bowl of them on her desk.

"You're awfully sweet to me."

"Nonsense," he smiled. "Now young lady, the thing for you to do is get back to bed. You're trembling like a leaf."

His nonchalant manner kept up her morale. She unpacked her bag, which had been rescued from the wreck. The sight of those articles she had expected to use at Franklin's shack, sickened her. She would buy others tomorrow. She wished she might never have to see them again.

When she was ready for bed, she threw the old negligee over her night gown and went to Don's door.

"What about calling my family? And have you told your mother?"

"I wrote her a letter," he replied. "I thought it would be easier for her than to call. It is going to be a great surprise to her, but I hope she won't think I've been unkind."

"She'll be angry?"

"Not mother. Her love is absolutely unselfish. My happiness is all that has ever mattered to her."

Sonia swung on the doorknob, asking thoughtfully, "Supposing she were not like that. Would you have let it keep you from marrying me?"

"Nothing could have kept me from marrying you, Sonia. Nothing in the world."

His tone was cooler than his words. She stared at him wondering how he could love her so much and be so controlled. He was certainly different. Imagine any other possessive male of her acquaintance agreeing to an arrangement like this!

"Go on to bed, Sonia. I'll call you when I've gotten them."

She sank upon her pillows gratefully. She had not realized she was so tired. When he called her she was half asleep. It was an effort to rouse herself sufficiently to explain her marriage to her father.

"Hello, Daddy . . ."

"Are you all right, Sonia?"

At the quaver in his voice the old lump rose in her throat.

"I'm all right. I bet you were worried about me."

"We sure were, honey."

"Well, you needn't be any more," she cried triumphantly.

"I have some good news."

His voice sang over the wire.

"You're coming home?"

"No, darling, I'm married."

There was a buzzing sound as if Sam Marsh were trying to get connection.

"What's that? I can't hear you."

Her eyes were wet with tears.

"I'm married, Daddy. To Don Stillwater. We were married this afternoon."

There was silence. Her heart sank. Was he going to be angry? But his voice when it came sounded only colorless, sad.

"This is a great surprise, Sonia. You're too young. But I wish you happiness. Don is a splendid man."

"Daddy, you're hurt?"

"No, it's all right. Whatever you do is all right with your Dad. But I can't . . . Your mother will talk with you."

Then Anna's voice, anxious and alarmed.

"How did you happen to do this, Sonia?"

"Oh, we just decided to. That's all. Don't tell anyone until I see you, Mother."

"But why shouldn't I tell anyone? I can't understand it, Sonia. If I could only have talked with you. Can't you come home?"

"Not just now. Perhaps soon."

Sonia replaced the receiver, weakly.

"They're awfully upset about it. And I thought they'd be pleased to death."

"It's too much for them on top of the accident, Sonia."

But Sonia felt no sympathy for her parents in this new turn of her fortunes. They should have been glad to have her disposed of so nicely. Suddenly she realized that after all it did not matter. Nothing mattered. Not their surprise, nor the fact of her marriage. She was exhausted as she had never been in all her life.

Only dimly conscious that Don turned out the lights and opened the windows; that he left her room and closed the door, she sank into sound, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XLIX

SUNSHINE streamed across the yellow roses in Sonia's room. She sniffed their fragrance even before she opened her eyes. A sense of warm well-being pervaded her. For the first time since the accident she had slept without crying out, without reliving the events of that tragic afternoon.

She looked about her lazily, at the gray wallpaper, the well rubbed, too orderly furniture. It was nice to waken to a new day, full of brand new interests. She was done with the real estate office. . . . A pang shot to her heart. But it was better that she should have no opportunity of seeing Franklin again.

She turned the wedding ring upon her finger. A married woman! She, Sonia Marsh! But was there any other bride in San Francisco so little married? Was not her freedom still intact? Guaranteed! Don was going to take her to Berlin. He promised to go earlier than he had planned. It was awkward staying in San Francisco. Still more so in Stockton. The thing to do was to get away. Burn all bridges behind her. Then she would have no chance of ever turning back.

As she lay thinking, she could hear Don splashing in the bathroom. Funny to have a husband, dressing with only a door between them! Sort of exciting, thought Sonia, wiggling deeper into the pillows. If only. . . . Oh, well, no use thinking of that. It couldn't be Franklin Crane.

What would he do when he knew? She had asked Don not to tell his uncle until he had to. She wanted no time for a scene of any kind. If she had to give Franklin up, it should be without gestures. She simply would not see him again. It was the only safe way.

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There was a knock on the door and Don entered, dressed for the day and looking so clean and radiant that her heart went out to him. It was pathetic that he should be so joyous over a gift which meant so little.

"How's my patient this morning?"

"No patient today. I'm going to get dressed. Only it's so nice to lie in bed and worry my old alarm clock. It simply can't understand what's the matter with me."

"I think it will be all right for you to be up today. You are looking like yourself again."

"I feel really rested."

He closed the windows and came to stand at the foot of her bed.

"Do you realize that you're beginning this day as Mrs. Don Stillwater?"

She smiled back at him.

"I do."

He hesitated and then asked, seriously, "Sorry yet, Sonia?"

Her eyes met his bravely.

"Not yet! How about you?"

"I should say not! See here, why don't you have your breakfast in bed?"

She flushed as she answered graciously, "I will if you'll have yours here with me."

His eager acceptance of the favor was sufficient reward.

So Mrs. Don Stillwater breakfasted in bed. And enjoyed it. She affected little matronly airs with the coffee pot.

"How many lumps? I'll remember next time."

At least, she decided, she would live up to the spirit of their contract. Or, in other words, thought Sonia naughtily, she "would fool the waiter."

"Sonia," said Don suddenly, "How about money? You'll need some new clothes."

"Oh, I'll spend my own. I have a little."

Pitifully little, she remembered since the purchase of silver cloth for an evening gown.

"Don't be an idiot," Don said, cheerfully. "Brides always have new clothes, you know. I want you to have anything you need."

"What's the matter with what I have?" flashed Sonia.

"Honey, you are better. That's the first natural remark you've made in three days."

"Well, what is the matter with them?"

"Your clothes are charming. But you'll need additional things for an ocean voyage. I hope you aren't going to be silly

about money. You can scarcely marry me and cost me nothing, you know."

"That's the only part I object to."

"Well, don't worry about it. I will charge it up to profit and loss. Don't let's have any further discussion of it, will you?"

"Not if it annoys you."

He said evenly, "It most certainly does. Check the finances! Many a happily married couple has been wrecked on that rock."

"Not in that particular way," she retorted.

"Tell me the name of your bank and I'll deposit some money. If it isn't enough to get whatever you want, let me know."

His generosity pleased her, but she had been sincere in her reluctance to spend his money. She began to wonder if it might not cheapen her in his eyes, to accept all the advantages of a wife, giving nothing in return.

When breakfast was over, he rose.

"I'm going now. You can dress when you please."

She lifted her face shyly.

"Am I to kiss you good-bye?"

"No, thanks. I don't even ask your kisses."

"But I don't mind."

His face was deeply red.

"I can't accept that kind of a kiss, even if you don't mind."

That made her feel as if she had stepped, heavily-shod, upon his most delicate sensibilities.

"I'm sorry," she faltered. "I seem to be awfully stupid. . . ."

"Not at all. I appreciate the spirit in which you offered it. How about lunch? Shall I meet you somewhere?"

It was 11 by the alarm clock.

"I won't care for lunch," she explained. "And I'm going to do some shopping. I'll see you this evening."

It was fun to bathe leisurely, to dress as slowly as she pleased. Like every other girl in the world, Sonia had long ago decided that she should have been born to luxury, to pleasantly idle hours, which she could fritter away, shopping, going to theaters, having tea somewhere. She would keep busy, and there would be no time left to think. It was going to be quite simple, much easier than she had supposed.

She walked downtown and spent what seemed an exorbitant

sum on silk underwear and a negligee. It was her own money, but she was quite reckless with it. She found herself thinking, "I may as well look my best."

She deliberately avoided Sutter Street. But as she walked down Grant Avenue she came face to face with Franklin!

Her cheeks were as white as the gardenia she wore. She attempted to pass with no more than a nod.

"Why, Sonia," he cried, "I've been to the hospital and they said you left yesterday."

She could not look at him.

"Yes, I did."

"But where did you go? Darling, I've been to the apartment. I've been everywhere I could think of. . . ."

She was forced to face him, but panic was in her eyes.

CHAPTER L

"I CAN'T explain to you now," Sonia said hurriedly. "I have an appointment."

"But where can I find you? Are you going back to the apartment? Aren't you coming to the office?"

"I haven't decided for sure," she lied. "I'll telephone you. . . ."

He stared after her as if she had slapped him in the face. She could feel his hurt, astonished gaze following her as she flew in the opposite direction. Her heart was pounding in a half-wild frenzy. She was suffocating.

But she would not weaken. She would not unbend before the melting sweetness of his glance. His caressing touch! Only—she had forgotten how it thrilled her! What little shivers it sent racing up her spine! No one else in the world could make her feel like that. She had been too ill in the hospital to be rational. Oh, if she had been herself she could never have done this thing. . . .

"But it's done now," she reminded herself, sternly.

She tried to remember all the arguments she had presented to Don. They were as valid as ever. But they seemed a mere discordant jumble of words. Meaningless theories! And what use had she for theories, when she had put an impassable barrier between herself and the only man she had ever loved?

She began to cry, silently, making no sound. No motion of her lips. Her breast hurt as if there were an inward bleeding.

At last she was in the hotel, asking for her key, soaring up in the elevator to the floor where she and Don had rooms.

Oh, the sheer stupidity of this agreement she had made! Fair to no one! She must have been insane.

She turned the key and fairly fell into her room. Dropping upon the soft, white bed! Crying as if her heart would break!

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Don's voice came to her vaguely. "What is it, Sonia?"

She did not answer, but struggled to suppress her sobs in the large, fat pillows.

Don watched her gravely.

"You're sorry, is that it?"

"Oh, yes."

His continued silence forced her to realize how poorly she was playing the game, whose rules had all been made in her favor.

"Don't pay any attention to me," she cried. "I'll be over it in a minute. Didn't know you were here."

He still said nothing and when at last she dried her eyes and sat up she was startled at his passionate countenance.

"Don, please don't look like that. I told you I'd probably be sorry."

His eyes were coals of fire.

"You've seen Franklin Crane?"

"Yes," she sighed. "We just happened to meet on the street. He's been hunting for me. He was worried. . . ."

His voice was broken with pain.

"Sonia, I didn't dream you cared for him like that."

She shrugged.

"Well, it's too late now. I planned this merry little mess myself. I must have been crazy. . . ."

She saw him wince.

"I don't mean that every word I said wasn't true. You are the right man for me. Only I was wild to think this sort of arrangement would work. It can't. Neither of us could stand it."

"You mean you want to be released from it now?"

"I'll have to be. I must."

"You can't," he said, sternly. "Not until the end of the year. You insisted you needed my help to keep out of trouble. I'll have to hold you to it, Sonia. In spite of yourself—in spite of everything."

She knew he was right, recognized the justice of his words even while she hated him for uttering them.

"I gave you every opportunity for not going on with it. I didn't want to rush our wedding like we did. Now it's only fair that you should stay with the bargain you made and face the consequences."

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In that moment Sonia felt that she had grown into a woman. Something irresponsible and childish in her died, never to be reborn.

"All right," she said quietly. "If you choose to hold me to it I can do nothing but submit. You are within your rights, of course. But you will lose the last chance you have of my learning to love you."

"Don't ever mention that to me again. There never was any chance of it. It was ridiculous of me to think there was."

Suddenly she saw herself as he must. Vain, erratic, a shallow little fool! She had trampled his self-respect, wounded his pride. And he had given her his name. She went to him then and took his hand.

"You are right, Don. I am not worthy of you. But I'll stick it out if you want me to. I'm sorry you heard me crying. . . ."

"I'm sorry, too," he admitted, grimly.

"Well, leave it as it is," she insisted. "I told you there would be times I'd regret it. This is one of them."

He left the room and did not return until dinner time. Sonia was dressed and they went to the Whitcomb for dinner, talking as if nothing had happened. But his eyes were haunted with sadness, hers wistful with regret. She could not understand the Sonia in the hospital who had inveigled them both into this. It was as if she had been another girl.

When they went back to their hotel he said goodnight without entering the room.

Sonia undressed and went to bed. She lay, straight and cold, in the new gown she had purchased. Its exquisite texture gave her no pleasure. She was sick with longing. If she could only be Sonia Marsh again, have back her old position in the real estate office, or at least be free to see Franklin. She knew he loved her. But if she went to Berlin he would undoubtedly marry Genevieve. And four lives would be ruined.

She had given her word. And Don had fulfilled every condition she had made. She loathed a quitter. Yet she had begged Don to marry her and then let him hear her crying about it the very next day. Well, she would stay with it. Even if he did not insist on it. And if it took her the entire year she would try to make up for the tears she had shed.

She slipped out of bed and ran, barefoot, to his door. She listened for a moment but could hear nothing. Then shivering with cold and her new resolution, she knocked. There was no answer. She softly turned the knob and went inside.

CHAPTER LI

DON was reading. As Sonia opened the door he looked up, surprised.

"I supposed you were asleep, Sonia. Is anything the matter?"

She climbed into a large upholstered chair, drawing her feet under her.

"I wanted to talk to you," she announced cheerfully.

"I don't think there is anything to be gained by a discussion tonight."

"Why not? I loathe putting things off."

"So I have observed," he remarked, drily.

Sonia could not keep the corners of her mouth from curving into a smile.

"I'm glad it amuses you. Perhaps I can see the humor some time, but I must confess it isn't very funny to me just now."

She became instantly sober.

"I am not amused. Far from it. I couldn't go to sleep until I had told you I'll do my best not to whine again."

Don frowned.

"That won't keep you from being unhappy. I shall be worried all the time for fear you are concealing your misery. It's no use. I must have been bewitched to let you in for this."

"It was my idea, you know. And I still think it the wisest thing. . . ."

"But you're eating your heart out for Franklin Crane. And before long you'll be hating me as you never dreamed you could hate. Not a pleasant prospect, Sonia."

She was ashamed to think that in those few hours of loneliness and shock she should have conceived a plan so preposterous. Poor Don! He looked so tired and old, much older than he seemed at breakfast in her room that morning. . . .

"Well, I don't know what I can do," she said, sadly. "Even if you intend to hold me to my contract I'd like to be friends."

She looked at him beseechingly. "Please don't be cold and formal with me, Don. No matter how much I deserve it."

He groaned, "I can see your side of it since this afternoon. I know now what you're going to have to go through. Always meeting some one who reminds you of Crane—some trick of the eyes, the shape of his head, or the sound of his laugh. . . ."

The thought of his laughter made her tremble.

"You see about how much chance I have of making you happy. Probably the first thing you'll do will be to run away."

She stared at him, fascinated. "I hope I'm not that yellow."

He asked, sorrowfully, "You want me to release you, Sonia?"

"Oh, no!" she answered, bravely. "I don't care so much. I'll play the game."

But she was white to the lips. Her green eyes were swimming in tears.

Don took her by the shoulders.

"You said you wouldn't lie to me. Do you really want to go on with this wretched farce?"

"I want to keep my word."

"Then say nothing more about it. Get your clothes ready. We will sail next week."

Sonia rose and started for her room. He was right. There was no use discussing it. She must put Franklin as far behind her as she could. Never look again into the dangerous sweetness of his eyes, never lose herself in the sweeping oblivion of his kiss. Suddenly she swayed. The walls of the room closed about her. She crumpled upon the floor.

When she opened her eyes she was in her own bed. Don was bending over her. His face was anxious and strained.

"Are you better, Sonia?"

"Yes, only I feel so queer and heavy, as if I'd sink through the bed."

He sat beside her and stroked her hand.

"Forgive me if I've seemed unkind. I haven't intended to be."

She closed her eyes.

"I want to do whatever is best for you, honey. And I'm not going to fling you back into Crane's arms if he isn't going to marry you."

"Well, he isn't," she sighed.

Two slow tears forced themselves down her cheeks. She brushed them away.

"I don't want to care about him. He isn't half the man you are. But it doesn't seem to matter whether he is or not. I simply can't bear to know I have to walk off and leave him to marry another girl."

"What could you do by staying?"

"He has said many times he won't marry her. I don't believe he will so long as I'm free."

"But you're not free, Sonia."

Her eyes closed again.

After a time he said, sadly. "My dear, I'm going to Berlin alone. I can't see my way to taking you even if you are willing to go."

She looked up joy streaming over her features.

"You don't want me to go?"

"No. It would be torture for both of us."

"You're right," she babbled. "It was all a mistake, wasn't it? You're wonderful, Don, to let me out of it . . ."

"Just a moment," he interrupted. "I'm not going to take you with me, but I am not releasing you from your contract."

Her face darkened.

"What do you mean?"

"I shall leave you here on only one condition. That is, you must leave San Francisco at once and go home."

"Oh, I can't go back to Stockton."

"You have no choice," he said firmly. "Otherwise I shall have to keep to our original plan. The temptations and complications which you admitted to me on Monday are no less real today. I promised to save you from them. I do not wish to force you to remain with me. But I shall require you to leave San Francisco. If Crane really loves you he won't forget you in a few months."

Disappointment clouded her face.

"And when I return," he continued, "if you wish your freedom I shall have our marriage annulled."

"I suppose I should be grateful to you."

"I don't want your gratitude. But I do insist that you spend the next four months with your parents."

Almost timidly she seized his well-shaped hand.

"I'm awfully sorry for all the trouble I've caused you."

He released himself, gently, but decisively.

"I was a fool to think you could love me."

When he had left her room she buried her head in her arms and cried.

CHAPTER LII

SONIA cried, but through the tears her eyes were shining. She felt as if Don's strong hand had pushed her back from waves that had almost engulfed her. She was in the land of the living again after tasting of death. After the folly of her impulsive marriage, she was to have another chance.

Even the prospect of four months in Stockton did not completely appal her. She would help her mother. She would sew for Vera's children. It was the price of her freedom. There would be any number of things she might do if only she were not compelled to go on being married, keeping up this pretense which she was sure now could not have deceived anyone. She imagined her mother already suspected something was wrong.

She was deeply contrite over her share of the incident, but "everyone makes mistakes," thought Sonia. It had been a reckless thing to suggest. She was surprised that Don had carried it through. But she did intend to keep her promise to him. She would not see Franklin except in the office to say good-bye.

Her heart raced, color flew into her cheeks. She would tell him she was going home, make him think she was giving him up. Then if he really wanted her, as her riotous intuition insisted he did, he would be forced to seek her. She would evade him for a few months without telling him her reason. The fact that there was a barrier between them might increase his desire. If she were away from him she could resist his wiles. In the end he would come to her, would cry, in a shaking voice, "Sonia, I love you too much." Her absence would give her the upper hand.

Thus Sonia planned her future anew, composing pretty speeches for her lover to make while her husband was in Berlin. The thought of Don sobered her. She told herself she really loved him, "in a different way, of course." But he was so

splendidly unselfish. Head and shoulders above all the other men in her life.

"Sometime," she pondered, "he will meet some one as fine as he is. Then he'll be glad he is not saddled with wild Me for a wife."

The thought left her strangely disturbed. In her heart she knew Franklin would never be the husband Don could be.

But the next morning she found herself humming as she dressed. The world seemed normal again. Bright and sunny and friendly. She was conscious of a rising sense of adventure. How foolish she had been to think that, on account of the accident, she had been done with thrills.

When she was dressed Don came to the door. His eyes looked as if he had not slept. But he smiled as he said, "You seem very happy."

"I am, thanks to you."

He was silent for a moment, then announced matter-of-factly, "I'm off for New York tonight. I shall write my mother and try to explain. But I'd rather not see her for awhile. The truth is she would see straight through my evasions. That is the last thing I want. While I'm gone, I can break it gradually."

"If only we hadn't told anyone," sighed Sonia.

"Yes. Well, we won't waste any time regretting. Can you arrange to go to Stockton tonight?"

"Oh, not tonight! I have a lot of things to do."

His lips tightened.

"I can trust you to go, Sonia?"

"Of course. But it will take a couple of days or so. I will have to pack Maxine's things and resign at the office . . ."

"You need not elaborate your reasons. I know you will need a little time. And you'll need some money. I deposited \$500 for you yesterday."

"I shan't touch it."

"As you please. It is deposited to your credit. If you do need it, I hope you'll feel free to use it. It obligates you in no way."

His voice was jaded. Her heart ached for him as if some one else had hurt him. She said, softly, "I can't use your money, Don. But I do appreciate that as well as everything else you've done for me."

He turned away.

"Do you wish to remain at this hotel?"

"No," she answered, practically. "I'm going back to the apartment. The rent there is paid until the end of the month."

"But won't you be nervous?"

"Not now, I seem to be all over it. Isn't it queer? I'm not a bit afraid to go back."

"It was the first time that was hard," he agreed. "I will see you there then tonight before I go."

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Sonia repacked her clothes. She was strangely anxious to return to the apartment. After the hotel it would seem like home. Even if Maxine were not there, even though she would never come again. She would go back to her memories of Franklin for these last nights. She would sit on the davenport where he had held her and look for his picture in the leaping flames.

It was noon when she finally opened the door of the room with its bright colors waiting for a human touch. She ran affectionately from one piece of furniture to another. Instead of the loneliness she had dreaded a welcome seemed to creep from the shadows. She patted cushions into place, straightened pictures, cleaned the grate, and laid a fresh fire. When the sparks were flying up the chimney she sat down solemnly, and drank a cup of tea.

That made her remember New Year's day and the tea she had served to Franklin. Walter Henderson's tea. She seemed doomed to ill-starred adventures and misunderstandings with the men she cared for most. But those moments with Franklin had repaid her for everything. Would she ever lie in his arms again? Four months was such a long time. She could only go through with it because in that way she earned her freedom and at the same time made herself more desirable.

Sonia told herself that she understood men. She knew how resistance led them on. She would lose no ground in Franklin's eyes by going home. Something sang triumphantly in her breast. She was leaving him, but he would never give her up.

CHAPTER LIII

TWILIGHT was falling before Sonia started to collect Maxine's possessions. She knew that most of the prints, cushions, and vases which gave the room its color, had not belonged to the girl who rented it.

It was pitifully easy to erase the traces of Maxine, her clothes, the toilet articles in the bathroom, and a package of letters, which Sonia burned. The paper was dusty and yellow with age. Sonia thought the writing resembled Walter Henderson's. But she would have scorned looking at the signature to find out. Maxine's secret should die with her. As the little packet shrivelled and blackened at the edges, she could not help remembering her friend's confession, Walter had taken her youth and freshness; the first of her untaught kisses. Maxine seemed to cherish no bitterness against him but she had admitted the necessity since of "some men lurking in the background," while Walter went on his well bred way, indifferent to the havoc he had wrought.

Sonia found a photograph in the bottom of a drawer. It must have been taken when Maxine first came to San Francisco. Her eyes were large and round and innocent. Her mouth sensitively fine. She had suffered, decided Sonia, before changing into the "hard boiled" woman of the world she had known. But she had been a loyal friend, had tried to give Sonia good advice. The younger girl wiped tears from her eyes as she put the photograph into her own suitcase. Maxine's father would not miss that.

She arranged the rather fussy clothes with little pats of apology. She knew Maxine would not have wanted these things of hers sent to a father, who cared nothing for her. But as Don had said, it appeared the only thing to do. When the trunk was strapped and ready, it seemed that Maxine's spirit had departed, too. The room was empty of her. Sonia felt a sick pang as she realized that she could have been happy here even

alone. If only she could have kept it for herself and Franklin! —Oh, well! No use to waste time thinking of impossibilities.

Don came at six o'clock. He looked very dignified and professional in his new overcoat—not a handsome man, but with something infinitely appealing in his quick smile and the whimsical flash of his eyes.

For a moment Sonia wished she were going to Berlin with him. Then remembering the difficulties and evasions the journey would incur, was glad enough to go to Stockton instead. There was nothing to pretending you're married when you aren't, she decided. It was indeed the subtlest kind of torture. Crowded with situations, which, without the glamor of romance, became burlesque.

"I suppose you've been frightfully busy," she said, watching him sink into the comfort of the cushions on the davenport.

"Yes, I did not realize how many details there were to be attended to. I spent a part of the afternoon with Uncle Jed."

Her eyes widened.

"You didn't tell him?"

"About our marriage? No. We've been able to keep it so far as I know. After I'm gone it won't make so much difference. I suppose you don't care to use my name?"

"No," she replied decisively.

"I thought not. Well, you won't be burdened with it long."

Some secret inward perturbation made her say, "Don, you don't seem to consider that I might change while you are away. If my absence will make Franklin appreciate me, why won't yours have the same result with me? Or don't you want it too?"

She could not explain the rush of tears to her eyes.

Don watched her without emotion.

"You are the queerest girl I ever saw. Don't you really know your own heart or are you trying to let me down easy?"

She made no answer. Indeed she could not have explained her reason for clinging to him, her inexplicable desire to run to him from every difficulty.

"Because I don't want your pity," he continued, sternly. "And don't misunderstand me about it."

"It isn't pity for you," she faltered.

"What is it then?"

"Pity for myself—that I haven't courage enough to be the wife I know I could be."

"Sonia, why do you say things like that? You know you don't give a hang for me."

She admitted, honestly, "Right this minute I do."

"But the next minute you won't, is that the idea?"

She nodded.

"Oh, I appreciate you so damned much," she cried. "It's Franklin Crane who stands in the way. I'd give anything in the world if when you come back I could love you the way you want me to."

There was no doubting the sincerity of her tone. And the moment Sonia formed the words she knew she had spoken the truth. Her plans for having Franklin seek her to tell her that he loved her seemed unworthy in Don's presence. She realized Don did not understand. His bewilderment was revealed by the startled question he threw at her.

"For God's sake, Sonia, do you know what you're implying?"

She flung back her head. Her eyes met his with their old challenge.

"I'd give anything in the world if I could love you."

Don's face lighted with instant passionate desire. He swept her off her feet and into his arms. He kissed her on the mouth, a slow kiss like the one he had given her after their wedding ceremony. Only this time it brought a frightened, reluctant response from Sonia's lips.

He held her away from him crying, "You like that. You wanted to kiss me!"

She was amazed at the storm of emotion she had aroused, thrilled in some subtle fashion that was entirely new to her relations with him.

"Honey," he cried, "I've been too careful with you. I should have made love to you long ago, should have fought for you with the weapons other men use. But it seemed like taking an unfair advantage. I dislike winning you with an illusion. A doctor understands how brief a span is allotted to passion. I have held back until I've almost lost you."

The magnetic, fiery, sweep of his appeal made Sonia tremble.

In the stress of her excitement she forgot Franklin, forgot

everything but the fact that Don Stillwater was capable of making love like this.

He laughed. "I suppose you thought me a coldblooded proposition. Not like other men?"

Her downcast expression admitted the justice of his suspicion.

"Listen to the truth, then honey! After tucking you in bed the night after we were married, I went out and walked the streets of San Francisco. Walked until dawn. Like a madman, Sonia, I dared not touch your bare arm as it lay across the counterpane. That's how coldblooded I am."

She clung to him, fascinated.

"I wish you had made love to me sooner. Before I came to San Francisco."

He pressed her tightly against his shoulder, which smelled faintly of tobacco. He whispered, "Shall I make you come with me now? I thought you were using me only as a means of escaping your infatuation for Franklin. But you're half in love with me, Sonia."

She was astounded at the desire he had succeeded in rousing in her.

She said slowly, "I told you I was. . . ."

CHAPTER LIV

BUT when he insisted that she meet him in New York City, Sonia shook her head.

"No, not yet. It's too sudden. We mustn't rush things again."

"But you really do feel entirely different about me?"

She nodded, color rising in her cheeks, her breath coming stormily. "Yes, but I can't understand why."

"It's because I've been a puritanical fool," he said, hotly. "I can't bear to go away and leave you now."

She smiled. "What is four months? I'll have to get used to my new idea of you. I have always thought you as safe as the rock of Gibraltar. I shan't any more."

"Will you promise to try to think of yourself as really married while I am gone?"

"Yes, I will act as if I were a real wife."

"Well, you are, you know. And I'm holding you to it. The records show that you are Mrs. Don Stillwater, whether you call yourself that or not. Do you think that is enough to keep you out of difficulties?"

"If that won't, being in Stockton will. You've nothing to worry about. And I'm not going to mind it so much. I've already decided to be as sweet as I can to my family—make up for the years I've been indifferent to them."

"I must make one more request of you, Sonia. Will you go to see my mother if she asks you? She will be hurt if you refuse."

Sonia shivered at the prospect of calling on Mrs. Raymond Stillwater. But she felt that she owed it to Don. So she answered, sweetly, "Yes, if she asks me, I will."

He left then, his kisses warm on her lips. He whispered, "My little sweet wife. You will be that to me when I come home."

She sank weakly before the fire. She could not account for

her change of feeling. It was finer than her madness for Franklin. Yet it did not make the memory of Franklin's kisses indistinct. Don had come nearer making her love him in that hour of farewell than in all the years she had known him. Sonia was disturbed. Could she be in love with two men? Or was her feeling for one of them an illusion? And if so, for which one? Still pondering, she heated a can of soup, then went to bed. Her mind was full of Don. She had not spent a moment sitting before the fire as she had planned.

She had hardly gotten into bed when the telephone rang. She lay shivering, afraid to answer. At last it ceased ringing. Then Sonia wondered. Had it been Franklin or Don? He might have forgotten something. She was still turning the question over in her mind when the doorbell pealed, angrily, insistently. She told herself it must be Don. She refused to consider any other possibility. Throwing on the new negligee she ran to the door, shrinking against the wall as she opened it—to Franklin Crane.

"Why didn't you answer the telephone?" he demanded, brushing past her.

She cried, "You shouldn't have come."

"Why not?"

He closed the door she had left open and confronted her. Sonia shivered at the look in his eyes.

"I had gone to bed."

"What do I care? When did you come back? Sonia! God, you're driving me crazy."

He sank into a chair, burying his face in his hands. She dared not touch him. After Don's passionate love-making she had no desire to kiss him. He looked weak and shaken. His eyes were red-rimmed, his lips trembling with angry words.

"Franklin," she said coldly, "You can't stay. You've been drinking."

"Why wouldn't I drink? You and I are going to have an understanding. What have I done to you that you should act like this?"

"What haven't you done?" she flung back, bitterly.

"Did I do anything at the hospital that day? You still loved me then?"

"Yes, I did," she faltered.

"I suppose it was what I said about getting married. Couldn't you see that I was wild with worry? The explanation to my mother and all?"

"I'm sick of your excuses."

He stared at her wildly. "You're different. You've changed."

"I'd be a fool not to change," she said, stonily.

"When are you coming back to the office?"

"Not coming, Franklin."

His face turned whiter.

"What do you mean, you're not coming?"

"My plans for the future are rather indefinite," she shrugged, "but I'm going home for a few weeks."

"You are not going to give up your job and go home?"

She swaggered, "Well, I am. Who's going to stop me?"

She wanted to be cruel to him. To hurt him as he had hurt her.

Franklin suddenly seized her by the shoulders. His tense fingers bruised her delicate flesh.

"This is Walter Henderson's work."

Sonia winced with pain.

"Let go my shoulder. You're hurting me."

He relaxed his grip and she flew across the room.

"There's no use for you to get excited, Franklin."

He said, despairingly, "Something has come between us. You have changed."

Then her heart melted. She ran across to him, seizing his face between her hands, crying, "It had to be, Franklin. We couldn't go on. It was killing me . . ."

He repeated, dazed, "But what could come between us? I'll do anything, Sonia. I'll break my engagement. . . ."

"It's too late," she sighed. "And there's nothing you can do about it. I'm going home."

He looked at her as if she had mortally wounded him. He was muttering. "This is Henderson's work, damn him!"

Her denial would only have made him more positive. She let him go, swaying as she stood, crying, "Oh, I'm such a fool. But it's so hard to give him up."

She began to walk the floor wringing her hands.

"I don't want to love him. He's not strong enough for me to love. I don't love him. I know I don't. . . ."

She ran to the window. Beneath her rippled the sea of lights that was San Francisco. Don was on his way to New York. Why hadn't she gone with him forced herself to fly from temptation? But she was going to Stockton. She was not going to see Franklin again. She would give him up.

Then she was sobbing, "I must tell him good-bye; must kiss him just once. I can't let him go like this. . . ."

CHAPTER LV

SONIA slept little her first night alone in the apartment. She was so nervous she was forced to climb out of bed and light one of the orange shaded lamps. Her eyes would almost close, then strain open again. She felt inordinately grateful for the steady glare of the light.

In the morning she was able to laugh at her fears. The sun was shining. Spring was in the air. She was sure that even Don could have found nothing to criticize in her conduct of the night before. She had acted as a wife should, reproachful and dignified.

As she dressed, she was mentally patting herself on the back. She had made the wisest move of her life when she married Don Stillwater. He was an anchor to a windward, a haven, a rock. Then Sonia smiled. Well, not exactly a rock since last night. She tingled with excitement when she remembered the way he had kissed her.

Yet the memory was disturbing. How could she feel as she did about two different men? Nevertheless she knew that if Don had insisted, she would have gone to Berlin with him. Franklin, in the white light of comparison, seemed petulant and weak. But the urge to call him back to her the night before had been a physical pain. It was disgusting and confusing. Was she never to know her own mind? She had been with Don so intimately the last few days that his image was stamped in her brain. She brought it out like a measuring stick for Franklin. Yet it was ridiculous because they were two distinct types. . . .

She told herself that she must be strong enough to leave without seeing Franklin again. If she could once get away from personal contact with him she might discover whether her case was hopeless or simply the infatuation she had made Don believe it was.

She really should go to Stockton that afternoon. But there

were too many things to do, although she could not have enumerated any of them. Don did not expect her to leave for several days. But she would pack and go not later than Saturday. Then suddenly she knew nothing could force her to go before Saturday. But she must go then. She wrote a note to her mother, telling her that Don had gone and she would be home.

"I'll explain everything then," she finished. "Tell Dad to be sure to meet me."

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Sonia posted the letter in the early afternoon on her way to the real estate office. She had decided it was time for her to resign. She found herself both hoping and fearing that she would see Franklin.

He was there, slumping at his desk, moodily intent on a contract. Sonia did not speak to him as he did not lift his eyes.

She went first to the balcony and collected the few possessions she had left in her desk, some pencils, a handkerchief, powder, rouge and cigarets. The girls watched her curiously. They seemed somewhat chastened by the death of Maxine.

Violet followed her into the dressing room.

"I'm awfully sorry you're leaving."

"Maybe you think I'm not," answered Sonia, powdering her nose.

"Sonia, old Jeddie didn't fire you, did he?"

Sonia summoned her haughtiest stare.

"Why should he?"

Violet pursed lips that were always too red.

"I thought maybe since the accident. . . ."

Sonia eyed her disdainfully. "You think too damned much," she said.

But, Violet was determined to get information.

"Wasn't it awful about Maxine? Is it true that she never breathed after they found her? Do you know Jinny says Mac is simply paralyzed for fear some one will tell his wife?"

"Some one ought to," stormed Sonia.

"Well, he's taking no chances.. Jinny says he has invited her to go east with him on a business trip. And she told Jinny she couldn't understand the change in her husband. She feels this trip is to be their second honeymoon."

"Oh, hell," exploded Sonia. "He makes me sick."

"Well, anyway," continued Violet, plastering her bangs damply against an alabaster brow, "the thing has certainly been kept quiet."

Sonia hastened to say good-bye. She dreaded the talk with Mr. Thomas and wished to have it over.

"You have entirely recovered from the effects of the accident?"

"Yes, Mr. Thomas." She wondered if it would startle him if she had replied, "Yes, Uncle Jed."

"You are ready to return to your bookkeeping?"

"No," she said, matching him in coldness. "I wanted to tell you that I am giving up my position."

There was not a flicker of surprise in his question.

"Are you remaining in San Francisco?"

"I'm going home."

He leaned forward, pressing the tips of well manicured fingers against those of the other hand.

"Miss Marsh, I hope your relations with the employes of this office have caused you no unhappiness."

Color swept in tell-tale waves across her face but her eyes met his defiantly.

"Not at all. I have nothing to complain of. I may return later. But for the present I wish to stay at home."

As Jed Thomas opened the door for Sonia, she saw Walter Henderson standing at Franklin's desk. The air in the office was electric. Something had happened. Both men looked angry. Franklin was gesticulating with ridiculous vehemence. Sonia was embarrassed. She could not return to the balcony nor reach the outer door without passing them. As she hesitated, she met Bertie Donahue's pale eyes. They were gleaming balefully.

Franklin's voice rose, "I'm warning you. You leave her alone or you'll damned well know what I mean."

Walter's face was beet red but he answered coolly, "You're not responsible for your remarks just now, Franklin. I shouldn't say any more if I were you."

He turned to see Sonia.

"How do you do, Miss Marsh?"

Sonia stammered a greeting, conscious of the ears of the entire real estate office. Franklin's face was so white it fright-

ened her. He had not offered to return her timid nod.

She lifted her head proudly. "I should like to talk with you, Mr. Henderson."

Walter turned his back on Franklin as if the incident just past had never occurred.

"What's the objection to my coming with you, then," he asked gallantly. "My taxi is just outside."

Sonia was delighted with the sang froid that made it possible for him to stroll so nonchalantly beside her. His breeding had not failed him in the most trying of situations.

"I'm proud of you," she cried admiringly, as they entered the waiting taxi.

He smiled and gave orders to drive through the park.

"I should have liked to punch his handsome nose for him, Sonia. But a row in the office is a bad thing, you know—too many people in on it, and most of them have evil minds. Upon my word I don't even know what he was driving at. Had the young devil been drinking? Or have you been trifling with his heart, too, Sonia?"

"He seems to think I have," she replied sadly. "But as a matter of fact it is the other way round."

He put his gloved hand over hers.

"I might have saved you many heartaches, my dear."

She sighed, "Yes, but I have to learn everything for myself."

"Sonia, I have tickets for the Orpheum tonight. Would you like to go with me?"

His unceasing effort to come to her rescue pleased her, but her refusal was instinctive.

When they entered Golden Gate Park he said, "Sonia, you are not happy. Do you by any possible chance need me?"

"Not now," she said positively. "I couldn't possibly marry you now."

The muscles about his mouth tightened.

"You mean?"

"It's too late. My bridges are all burned."

CHAPTER LVI

AFTERWARDS Sonia wished she had been more explicit. Her marriage was so impassable a barrier in her own eyes she did not stop to consider how misleading her statement to Walter might be. But she felt an instant change in his attitude. He spoke of Maxine's death, impersonally, as if his mind were on other things. The conversation was of no consequence until he left her at her door.

Then he said, "Sonia, I am not a young man, but I love you more than you realize. Until this afternoon I had not given up hope. But I see now that it was bound to end this way." He shrugged well tailored shoulders. "One can't escape fate."

Those were his last words to her. For days afterwards they rang in her ears, the irony of them spoken by him that day!

As she entered the apartment the telephone rang. Sonia answered it, knowing well it must be Franklin. His voice was hoarse and cruel.

"Oh, you're home are you?"

"Did you wish to speak with me, Franklin?"

"Sonia, I must see you."

Her hand tightened about the receiver, but she answered, "Not after the scene you staged in the office this afternoon."

"But I've got to see you. I've something important to tell you."

The despair in his voice was like a fierce hand at her throat, that she gasped, "Oh, well, then, for a little while."

His receiver clicked in her ear.

She sat inertly, waiting. She should have gone to Stockton that afternoon, not waited until Saturday. Why had she written that she would not be home until then? Not that her letter mattered. She could still go on Friday if she wished. But she did not wish to go. Harrassed by indecision, wracked with doubts, she waited.

By the time Franklin came, she was in a state of cold, pas-

sionless nervousness. Fear of him was uppermost. But the moment he came in his jaded anguished countenance pierced through her fright.

He shouted, "You aren't playing square with me."

"Try not to be insulting, Franklin. You don't want to marry me."

"Oh God, you know I do."

Her face blanched at his tone, but she replied, "At any rate you couldn't see your way clear to breaking your engagement with some one else."

"Is it too late now?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "It is too late."

He sank upon the davenport and stretched out shaking arms. She knew he had been drinking again, but now she felt that his misery was some excuse for him.

"I can't, Franklin. I think you'd better go. I shouldn't have let you come at all."

An irresistible force was drawing her to him.

She cried, "No, I won't kiss you. I never want to kiss you again."

But her lips met his exultantly. She lay panting against his heart. She could feel its wild throbbing beneath her gown.

"Oh, Sonia, you know I love you. I have never loved anyone in my life as I do you. How can you treat me like this?"

"You wouldn't let me be sweet to you. You drove me to it."

"Why couldn't you have had a little patience, sweetheart? I told you I would play fair."

"I suppose you did mean to," she agreed sadly. "But the cards seemed stacked against us."

"Sonia, do you remember what you said after our Sunday in Pirate's Cove?"

What a dreary distance they had covered since that one perfect day. Sonia shivered.

"You said you took your fate in your hands and twisted it to suit yourself. Are you afraid to say that now?"

She hid her face upon his shoulder, and its faint tobacco odor reminded her of Don, her husband, whose wishes she had promised to respect. She pushed the hair from her forehead, crying, "Maxine's death made a coward of me."

"You are no coward, darling. And you belong to me by every law under heaven."

The blood was racing in her veins. The old attraction flared between them like an electric current. His blue eyes were pleading, "Don't be cruel." His mouth, wistful with longing, begged her to be kind.

She drew his face down to hide the sight of it.

She whispered, "Oh, darling, you know I love you."

"I've been through hell, Sonia. I haven't seen Genevieve since the accident. I tell you I'm crazy with fear of losing you. I can't give you up. She can think anything she pleases. I'm through with her. I'll never go back."

Triumph swept her like a wave.

"You'll break your engagement?"

"I have broken it. I told my mother I can't possibly marry Genevieve."

"When did you tell her?"

"Last night."

Last night, after she had already told Don she might love him when he returned! After she had promised to go back to Stockton and do nothing unworthy of his wife.

Sonia dragged herself from her lover's arms, crying, "Oh, no, it can't be. It isn't true."

"Sonia, I swear it is. My mother is furious. She has threatened me with everything. I'm not even going home tonight."

"Where are you going?" she asked weakly.

"Up to my shack."

"You're going up to the shack where we were going last Saturday?"

"Yes. Sweetheart, will you come with me now? Haven't I suffered enough?"

She turned away from the temptation of that request. She threw her marriage like a sacrifice before it.

"I can't, Franklin. There's a reason I can't. I told you. . . ."

"No reason on earth can keep you from going. Unless you're already married. . . ."

"But I am," she stammered with white lips.

"You're married already?"

She nodded, wondering dully if he meant to kill her.

But he dropped her ruthlessly from his arms and swept out the door.

CHAPTER LVII

A WHITE night for Sonia! She lay on the davenport before a dying fire, consumed with loneliness, eaten by remorse. Franklin had played fair with her when she had least expected it. Her plan of evading him had worked too quickly. She was caught in her own trap.

It infuriated her to think she had been so stupid, so blind as not to see that he was sincere in his devotion. She could have forced the issue long ago by using the same tactics, without involving herself in a perfectly hide-bound marriage.

The thought of Don came to her vaguely, as a figure in a dream. He was wonderful, but. . . . The habit of loving Franklin could not be broken by one hour of Don's love-making, stormy though it was. The touch of Franklin's arms had been able to obliterate all traces of the finer feelings. Her lips longed for the kisses they had known all winter. Her head ached to snuggle into the warm hollow of his shoulder. Every nerve in her body was keyed to his. A physical tie! Before it everything else was swept away, save mad, wild, impulse!

Sonia twisted her fingers until the knuckles whitened. She cried, "Oh God, send him back to me. I'll do anything. Suffer anything . . ."

He had not given her a chance to explain that it was Don, not Henderson, she had married. Not that it would matter which man stood in his way. He would hate her just the same. She pictured him driving to his shack, a disembodied spirit flinging into the night! She trembled to think how he was suffering. He might deliberately drive the car over the grade. He was capable of any madness. She put her hand across her mouth to keep back a scream.

Then she began to pace the floor. She muttered, frantically, "If anything happens to him it will be my fault."

Drops of rain spattered intermittently against the windows.

She pictured him cold and broken at the bottom of a ravine, his face so vivid that she ran to turn on all the lights. She sobbed, "Something is happening."

She visioned his face, so sweet and wistful even in death. . . .

Then the rhythm of the rain sounded slow, heavy, like a funeral dirge, beating into her brain. She drew the shades to shut it out. She wound the phonograph but it refused to turn. It made her remember one other night when Bertie had wished to dance with her, Bertie with his clammy hands and evil eyes. How pleased he would be if he could see her suffering!

That thought sobered her. She must get hold of herself. Franklin was safe. Perhaps after all he had not gone to Marin County. Perhaps—the thought was a subtle hope of justification—he had been lying. How did she know? His version of the quarrel with his mother might have been only a ruse to persuade her to accompany him.

She smiled, nervously, telling herself she was a fool to believe him. He had lied to her once. He would again. While she was enduring this mental anguish he was no doubt asleep in his own bed.

She looked at the clock. One-thirty. The idea to find out became an obsession. She must know. She could not sleep until she had heard his voice. If he were at home, she would tell him she wished to see him once more. Then she could go to sleep. She thought, wistfully, of how well she could sleep if she were sure.

But what would the servants think? Supposing his mother should be waiting up for him and should answer the telephone? Well what if she did? Why should she worry over his mother's opinion? What had she done to deserve consideration from Sonia?

She lifted the receiver, grimly, and repeated the number in a clear hard voice. She waited, frozen with apprehension.

There was no answer.

Sonia rattled the telephone, insisting that the operator ring again.

"I know there is some one there. They'll answer if you ring long enough."

After an eternity of waiting, a voice said, crossly, "Hallo."

"Will you call Mr. Crane? It is very important."

She swayed dizzily. He must be there. Of course he had gone home. He was always a little dramatic. It led him to exaggerations, to lies which were not intentional. He would be there. But, perhaps, he would not answer. Supposing he did not wish to talk with her, would not give her a chance. . . .

"Mr. Crane is not at home. Will you leave a message?"

"No. Thank you very much."

He was not there. He had not lied.

She sank on the floor before the fireplace trying to warm her cold hands.

So it was true! He really had broken with Genevieve and refused to go back. But there was no joy in it now for Sonia. She had bound herself, hopelessly, for at least four months. In the meantime he would return to his fiancée. Well, even that would be better than the pictures she had imagined earlier in the evening.

The clock struck two. Sonia told herself she must go to bed. Everything would seem different in the morning. She would laugh at these silly fears which were bred of the night and nerves.

She undressed rapidly and turned off the lights. Time to cut out this foolishness. How old was she? Eight or 18? Hysterical! That's what she was . . . She threw the window open to the rain.

"Nothing about that to make you nervous. Used to like it when you were little."

In bed she closed her eyes and listened. It fell gently, insistently, dripping dripping . . . She sat up in horror. It might be dripping on Franklin's face, upturned in death.

"Oh, I can't stand this!" she moaned.

She wrapped her heavy coat and a comforter about her, and stood before the window, looking down upon the sleeping city. But was it sleeping? Or were there other girls, wide-eyed with fear and remorse also facing the dark? Girls more hopeless than she? "In trouble!" She thought, violently, "At least they have known what it is to love. They haven't been cheated, starved like I have."

For a moment she envied them. It would be better to have

tasted life to the dregs than to see it held before your lips and snatched away.

What would have happened if she had gone with Franklin the first time he had asked her? Alone?

Maxine would probably be living; Don would have gone away untroubled by their misleading alliance. She herself, perhaps this moment, would be warm in her lover's arms.

Wrong! Wrong! All this "blah" about conventions! She had said it once before to Walter Henderson. She repeated it now with the despairing conviction born of the desolate night. Everything had gone wrong since she had started denying Franklin. Until then their love had been almost perfect. Prudishness was not natural. God or "Whoever it was" did not intend lovers to give so much and no more.

She told herself, bitterly, that the training of her early childhood had wrecked her life.

CHAPTER LVIII

FRIDAY morning found Sonia paying the penalty of her hysterical night. Her head ached miserably. She felt depressed and uneasy. Although she realized her fears had been morbid and imaginary, she called the office at 11 o'clock to see if Franklin was there. She was informed that "Mr. Crane had not been in," that morning. She called again at three with the same result. Then, determined to break the silence before another night, whatever the cost, she telephoned his home.

"Mr. Crane is not feeling well enough to talk. Will you leave your number?"

She gave her name outright. Thank God, he was there! She was not worried over the nature of his illness. He had probably been drinking. But, if ever a man was justified, he was this time. She knew from experience that he could go for weeks without a drop of liquor. He had proved it before Christmas, when they had been so happily in love.

The reaction left Sonia faint with relief. No matter what else happened at least he was alive. The warm comfort of that thought made her realize that there was always a way out of every difficulty, no problem which did not have some solution—provided, added Sonia, wisely, "one keeps one's head. You didn't quite do that last night, old thing."

She dressed with enthusiasm and went out to loiter among the shops of Chinatown. A favorite spot! She loved the exotic sights and smells, the color of fat Chinese women, in sober black trousers, the anomaly of Chinese flappers, with bold eyes and painted cheeks—all peculiar to her San Francisco, her city, she had promised to leave. She saw it that day through a golden haze of farewell.

When she returned to the apartment she had stored her mind with pictures for barren days to come. Her arms were loaded with packages, trivial oddities which would please her

mother and Vera. She had attained also a protective self-control.

She had left her name at Franklin's home—a direct challenge, which if he chose to neglect she could not pursue. It was up to him.

She retired early and dropped into deep slumber.

Before she was out of bed the next morning her telephone was ringing. Her heart gave a throb of joy as she answered. He cared enough to call.

She said, "Franklin, I'm leaving for Stockton this afternoon. Am I to go without seeing you?"

"Do you want to see me, Sonia?"

"Of course I do. I have several things to tell you."

His voice was without life as he suggested the States, at noon.

Seated in a booth, marked New Jersey, which brought no smile from either of them, Sonia began to talk. She was startled at his indifference. His attitude was almost pathetically resigned.

"I was worried about you Thursday night," Sonia admitted. "Did you get to the shack all right?"

He looked up as if from a trance.

"Oh, yes, I made it all right."

"I didn't know . . . but that the rain would make it hard for you."

"The rain?" His shiver was scarcely perceptible. "It was a bad night."

"Franklin," she said, gently, "you aren't angry with me?"

"Angry with YOU?" She trembled before the magic sweetness of his voice. "Sonia, darling, I couldn't be angry with you if you plunged a knife deep into my heart."

She leaned across the table then to whisper, "You think I'm married to Walter Henderson, but I'm not."

"You are not married to Henderson?"

Sonia smiled, sadly. "No. It's Dr. Don Stillwater, from my own town."

His eyes stared at her. He repeated almost stupidly, "You're not married to Henderson?"

"No, but after all, the fact of my marriage is unchanged. It doesn't matter who it is."

"No, of course not. It doesn't matter."

How terribly upset he must have been. To be so nervous! The hand that lifted his glass of water shook visibly.

"Franklin," she said, earnestly. "I suppose it's unreasonable to hope that you can understand the reasons back of all this. But you certainly know it wasn't because I didn't care for you. . . ."

His understanding nod was so free from bitterness that it brought a sob to her throat. With an effort she went on, "I thought you didn't really love me. I was terrified with the shock of Maxine's death. It seemed then that I was through with excitement forever. All I wanted was to be safe and protected."

He said, then, "You needn't explain your motives, Sonia. I know exactly how you felt."

The waiter served their order. When he had left, she continued: "But you don't understand that ours is not a real marriage. Oh, it is legal enough. But I entered it selfishly and I couldn't go on with it. Don has gone to Berlin for the summer and has promised to release me when he comes home."

Her words did not have the effect she had anticipated.

"I'm going away, too," he said, drearily. "Mother and I are going for a trip right away."

"Where, Franklin?"

"Oh, across the ocean somewhere. I don't care."

She asked through lips determined to smile: "Are you going on account of me?"

"Partly. Mother is glad enough to take me. She feels it will settle things."

"You asked her to take you?"

"Yes."

After a moment he asked: "What are you going to do in Stockton?"

How could she tell him that she had planned to wait there for him?

"Nothing much, I guess."

"How can you endure to go back? I thought you had always hated it?"

"I do," she admitted. "But it was Don's one condition when he left."

"Wanted you away from my influence, did he?"

"Something like that."

"He needn't have worried. You can tell him for me, I'm not running after another man's wife."

His attitude puzzled her.

"But, don't you see? I'll be free after Don comes home?"

"Do you really think that means anything? That he is going to give you up after you're married to him?"

"We aren't really married," she insisted. "It can be annulled."

Then for the first time there was a flash of emotion in his face. His hands pressed hers. He whispered, "Do you mean you'll wait for me?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Sonia Marsh, you're the one thing under Heaven I do want. If you had only had a little confidence in me. . . ."

"Oh, I know. . . ."

"It's too late now. Oh, God, if you could only have waited! We are both too headlong, Sonia."

"Who knows it better than I?" she grieved. "I'm going to have to pay with four months of Stockton. But perhaps in that time we shall learn wisdom. Do you think it possible?"

His blue eyes were blazing with passion as he answered, "I'd given you up. I never dreamed there was a chance. . . ."

"Do you have to go away?"

"I'm afraid I will now. Can't you stay in San Francisco until I go?"

"I promised Don I wouldn't. He has been so good to me, I must play fair. But I suppose we can write. Will you write to me, Franklin?"

He whispered, fiercely, "What use are letters? When I am dying to hold you in my arms?"

CHAPTER LIX

IT WAS difficult for Sonia to withstand from Franklin's pleading. She forced herself to answer calmly, "Not much use, are they? And yet a letter is better than nothing."

He shook his head, begging, "Sonia, wait until tomorrow. Don't go tonight."

"I must. I've written them."

"But we could call them up, darling. What's another night to them when we aren't to see each other for months?"

"I wish I could. I'd give anything . . ."

"Then you will. I'll be good, sweetheart . . ."

"No," she said, stubbornly, although there were tears in her eyes. "I will not break my promise to Don."

She was afraid her refusal might anger him. But he accepted it, heartbrokenly.

"There is no use trying to persuade you?"

"No."

But longing sang in her voice. She touched his hand lingeringly.

"You know I don't want to."

He went back to the apartment with her. He held her achingly close in his arms. She was conscious of an added gentleness in his embrace, born, no doubt, of the inevitability of their parting.

She held his face between her hands, crying, "You will be true to me while you're away?"

"Do I need to prove that now, Sonia?"

"I'll never doubt you again. Four months is not so long."

"It will be longer than that, Sonia, perhaps a year."

She flung back her head, smiling, "What's a year?"

Then burrowed back into his arms, because she knew that year would be endless, lifelong, immortal, stretching into eternity . . .

At four o'clock she tore herself from his embrace, crying, "I must go."

His farewell kiss was without passion, chilled with acceptance of her decision.

"I'll take you to the ferry, Sonia."

She hurried to leave the apartment. It felt vacant already. Tenantless! She left the keys with the landlady on the first floor. She sighed, "Well, I'll never see that old room again." She felt no reluctance in leaving. Its color would be dimmed without Franklin. It held memories, but she had learned that memories cool quickly. She was impatient now to be off. To get through her period of probation. She thought, "At any rate, I'm going away just as 'nice' as when I came. That ought to please Dad."

Franklin drove silently and with care through the traffic. Sonia wondered if the accident had taught him a lesson. There seemed nothing more to be said between them. One thought loomed big in both their minds—she was going away!

When they reached the ferry he bought her flowers. Spring blossoms—daffodils and tulips, messengers of hope. She took them into eager arms.

As they turned Sonia heard newsboys shouting extras. At almost the same moment she saw the headlines, "Body of Wealthy Berkeley Man Found in the Bay."

She did not know what impulse made her buy a paper. Without waiting for Franklin, she held out her own coins, seizing the sheet from the newsboy's hands. But as she read she felt it was no news to her. Had he not warned her with his farewell on Thursday? It was Walter Henderson's body, that had been found not far from Fisherman's Wharf.

Her terrified eyes turned back to Franklin.

She gasped, "Oh, isn't it terrible? He should have been stronger than that."

"You think it was on your account?"

"What else can I think? He wasn't robbed. There was some money in his pockets." Her voice broke. "And the emerald ring he'd offered me."

"You see, Franklin, he had proposed to me again that afternoon. And when I told him I could not marry anyone now, I'm afraid he misunderstood."

"He thought it was because of me?"

"Isn't it awful? I had no idea he cared like that."

His harsh laugh grated on her nerves.

"That's your trouble. You've no idea of the hell you're responsible for."

She faced him sadly, admitting the truth of the charge, but hurt that he should make it.

Then she said, "Franklin, I can't go home now. I'll have to wait."

She carried the paper with her to a small hotel at the edge of Chinatown. She registered as Sonia Marsh, and Franklin left, promising to call later.

Sonia followed a bellboy to her room. She watched with apparently absorbed eyes as he raised a window and snapped on lights. She was not really seeing a motion he made, although she tipped him, gratefully, thankful to be alone, to face the fact of this new tragedy for which she was again indirectly responsible.

She read and re-read the half column. There were no clues beyond the ring as to the motive for suicide. Henderson was connected with the Thomas Real Estate Co., details that gave no comfort to the bewildered girl.

What must have been his thoughts before he took the plunge? What anguish of disillusionment and uncertainty? She could not imagine a man so controlled and well-balanced as Walter Henderson permitting himself to reach the required point of desperation.

But how little, after all her boasted knowledge, she knew of men, their feelings or motives! They had all taken her by surprise—Don with his sudden tempestuous kisses the night he went away; Franklin with his unexpected loyalty; and now, Walter Henderson, who had taken his life for love of her.

Sonia unpacked the bag she had brought and ordered dinner in her room.

It was dark when she slipped out to buy more papers, all she could find. There was little variation in the stories. He had been dead for many hours, probably a suicide, the motive unknown. Two papers spoke of the emerald ring in an inner pocket and hinted at a love affair.

Back in her own room Sonia scanned them thoroughly, but there was nothing more to be gained.

The body had been taken to the San Francisco morgue pending investigation. The thought made her shudder. She hoped she would not have to see him again. He had been in the bay two days. He was always so immaculate, so well-groomed, so fastidious. Tears streamed down her cheeks to think of him, floating for hours in evil-smelling water . . .

At 9 o'clock Franklin called to tell her he had a bad headache and was going to bed. She felt relieved. For once she did not feel up to seeing him. But she answered sympathetically, asking if he had seen all the papers.

"Yes," he answered, wearily. "Nothing much to be learned, is there? Well, I'll see you tomorrow, Sonia."

When she was undressing for bed she remembered that the next morning her father would go to meet her. In the stress of her emotion over Henderson she had neglected, as always, her family.

She ran to the telephone, repentantly, and called Stockton. No matter how late it was, she must talk to her father. Must explain to him that she was not coming before the morning that he expected her.

CHAPTER LX

SHE sensed the instant fear in her father's voice.

"I'm all right, Daddy. Don't be frightened."

"Why aren't you coming home?"

She tried to explain that the news of Henderson's death had been responsible for her staying in San Francisco.

"But why should you, Sonia? What can you do?"

As always he was stubbornly intent on one idea.

"Mr. Henderson was a friend of mine," she cried, half angrily.

"Is that any reason why you should put off your trip home? I'm sorry, of course, honey. He seemed like a very nice gentleman. But when are you coming?"

Sonia kicked the side of the bed. There was no use trying to explain to him.

"Oh, I don't know, Daddy. A day or so. I want to see what they find out."

"Well, you can get the papers here. There's nothing you can do," he repeated. "I want to see you, Sonia. I thought you were already on your way."

"Don't be silly about it, darling."

"Where are you staying?"

She gave the name of her hotel.

"I want to talk with you, honey. You know a lot of things have happened that your mother and I can't understand. Why didn't you go to Berlin with your husband?"

"Oh, I told mother I'd tell you all about it when I come home. I can't do it now."

"Will you come tomorrow?"

"Not tomorrow, Daddy. Monday or Tuesday."

"Is that a promise, Sonia?"

Sullenly she repeated, "I suppose so."

Then she heard him cry, "I'm so worried about you."

"Nothing to worry about . . ."

But there was unutterable pathos in his good-bye.

Sonia replaced the receiver and brushed the tears from her eyes.

"He is the most ridiculous, sentimental idiot that ever lived. And never in the wide world will he understand this marriage of mine. I won't dare let any other man come near the place."

.

Sunday was a long day. The papers gave no additional information. Sonia, restless and disturbed, would have liked to go to Pirate's Cove again. But she did not wish to suggest it to Franklin. He came for her late in the afternoon and they took a short drive. The deferred separation, together with Henderson's death, had dampened their ardor. He kissed her mournfully, as those kiss who may die before they meet again.

"Mother and I are leaving this week."

"Really?" Sonia asked, dully.

There was no reason why she should remain, if she could not be with him.

Monday both of them were summoned to the inquest for Walter Henderson. Sonia dreaded it. She had never been in a morgue. The mere thought of the place terrified her. Ghastly tales floated into her mind—bodies kept on ice for months waiting to be identified. . . . Her flesh prickled at the thought.

She wished Franklin would go with her, but he said it would look better if he accompanied the other men from the office. For some silly, undefinable reason his refusal, reasonable as it was, hurt.

She braced herself with several cups of coffee. A morgue! Ugh! She could not bear it. But she went, alone!

She was surprised to see so many people there. Jed Thomas, Bertie, Franklin and another salesman, the dead man's housekeeper, the Italian fisherman who had found the body, doctors, friends and reporters.

The first witness was the fisherman. With many flourishes and much rolling of the eyes he told of finding the body, early Saturday afternoon.

The housekeeper, a nervous, distracted little woman, testified that Walter had not been home since Thursday morning.

"Mr. Henderson was a fine gentleman. I've kept house for him many years and his mother before him."

"Had he seemed brooding or melancholy lately?"

"That he did not. He was always cheerful. Most all the time."

"Do you mean there was any time when he was not?"

She twisted her hands admitting, "Well, yes, sir, there was . . ."

"When was it?"

"One day, some time ago. New Year's Day it was. I remember, because he had said he would be out all evening. But he came home about 6 o'clock. I saw him sitting in the library and went in to ask him if he wanted something to eat. He was sitting with that ring in his hand. . . ."

"The ring on the table?"

"Yes, sir. And he says, 'Ella'—he always called me Ella—'Ella,' he says, 'this damned ring has brought me nothing but bad luck.'"

Sonia stirred and the color crept into her face. Those had been his exact words to her.

"Go on, Mrs. Hathway. Did he say anything more at that time or later?"

"No, sir. He shut up like a clam, and never mentioned it again."

"You're sure he showed no later moodiness or unhappiness?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mrs. Hathway, you say you have been a servant in the Henderson family for years. Do you happen to know of any deaths by suicide among any of the immediate family?"

"No, sir. Not one of them."

"That will do."

Jed Thomas, in his colorless voice, testified as to the satisfactory state of the deceased's finances. This was augmented by the president of Henderson's bank.

A doctor testified that the body had been in the water approximately 36 hours.

An acquaintance from Berkeley told of seeing Henderson on Thursday evening at a theater. He was alone.

It was determined that death must have occurred some time between 11:30 Thursday night and Friday morning.

Franklin testified that he had seen Henderson in the office on Thursday afternoon.

"Did he seemed worried or distressed over anything?"

"He seemed as usual."

"Please answer yes or no."

"No," said Franklin.

"Do you happen to know where he went after leaving the real estate office?"

With white face Franklin replied, "He left the office with Miss Marsh."

Then Sonia heard her own name called.

"Miss Marsh, you were a friend of Walter Henderson's?"

"Yes."

"When did you see him last?"

"He took me home from the office in a taxicab Thursday afternoon."

"Did you have a quarrel with him? Was there trouble between you of any kind?"

"No quarreling."

"Do you mean to imply that there was some trouble?"

Her green eyes were regretful as she answered, "I told him I could not marry him."

A murmur ran through the quiet room.

"Had he asked you that question before?"

"Yes. Several times."

"Have you ever seen this ring?"

So at last Sonia was to claim the emerald.

"He offered it to me as a gift at Christmas time. Then, when I refused, he had it reset in an engagement ring."

"You were engaged to him then?"

"Only for a few days."

"When did you break that engagement, Miss Marsh?"

She answered, shakily, "On New Year's day."

CHAPTER LXI

THE coroner's voice was as smooth as velvet.

"Now, Miss Marsh, you tell us that on the afternoon of the day Walter Henderson was drowned, you refused his offer of marriage for the second or third time?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was there anything different about this last proposal?"

"I don't understand what you mean?"

"Anything more definite? More final? Would it be possible for you to repeat your conversation?"

Sonia's eyes dared not meet her lover's as she repeated her words to Henderson on that last day.

"I told him marriage between us would be impossible."

"Did you give him any reason?"

Color swept to her black hair as she replied, "I said it was too late. My bridges were all burned."

She saw cold surprise in Jed Thomas' face. But when the coroner urged an explanation of her words she lifted her head, proudly. "Is that necessary? I am repeating my exact words to Mr. Henderson."

"Very well. Continue."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"He said that he wasn't a young man any longer, but he had not given up hope until that afternoon. And when he left he added, 'One can't escape fate.'"

"Those were his last words to you?"

"Yes."

"That will do."

As Sonia took her seat, sighing with relief, she caught a peculiar smile on Bertie's face. What did it mean? She had told the truth. He couldn't say anything which would be more embarrassing. But she watched him, anxiously, as he rose. Her lips were suddenly dry. Her throat burned. She could not take her eyes from his thin, sharp features.

"Mr. Donahue, you are a salesman for the Thomas Real Estate Co.?"

"I am."

"Do you recollect seeing the deceased in the office of that company on Thursday afternoon?"

"I certainly do."

"Will you tell us, please, if you heard or saw anything to make you think his state of mind might have been unsettled?"

"When I saw Mr. Henderson on Thursday afternoon he and Mr. Crane were quarreling."

The corner leaned forward.

"You say the gentlemen were quarreling? Can you state the nature of that quarrel?"

"Mr. Henderson started to pass Mr. Crane's desk and Mr. Crane said something to him in a low voice which I did not understand. Henderson stopped as if he were surprised. And Crane shouted, so that all of us in the office could hear, 'I'm warning you. You leave her alone or you'll damned well know what I mean.'"

Sonia sent one swift, pitying glance in Franklin's direction. He was leaning forward. His blue eyes had the desperate straining look of a rat caught in a trap. In that moment Sonia could have clawed the flesh from Bertie's mottled face . . . that he should dare to throw suspicion on her lover. It was ridiculous. No one would believe him. But the coroner was asking, "And what was Henderson's reply?"

"He said, 'You're not responsible for your remarks just now, Franklin. I shouldn't say any more if I were you.'"

"What did he mean by saying that Mr. Crane was not responsible?"

Bertie smiled. "He may have referred to Mr. Crane's condition."

"Was Mr. Crane intoxicated that afternoon?"

"I would not say he was intoxicated. He had been drinking."

"Continue your testimony, please."

"At that moment Miss Marsh came up and they left the office together."

"You mean?"

"Miss Marsh and Mr. Henderson."

The room became filled with undercurrents. The air was

close. The coroner, seated at his table, swayed before Sonia's eyes.

He called upon the other salesmen, who, reluctantly, corroborated Bertie's story. Mr. Thomas, also, was forced to admit that it was true. Under pressure he gave the additional information that Franklin Crane was subject to periodic drinking spells, that he had been absent from the office the day following the quarrel.

Sonia could understand the drift of the testimony. She realized that it was purely malicious on Bertie's part, but evidence was piling up against Franklin.

She twisted her hands together frantically when Franklin was called for the second time.

"Mr. Crane, when you testified the first time you did not tell all you knew about this matter."

"I did not think the words I had with Mr. Henderson in the office had any bearing on his death."

"You didn't. That's rather a strange attitude on your part. If you had heard another man threaten him on the afternoon he met his death by drowning, would not you have considered it pertinent?"

Franklin did not answer. Sonia could not bear to look at his face.

"Now, Mr. Crane, if this quarrel has no bearing on the case it will be very easy for you to prove an alibi. Give us a detailed account of every hour you spent on Thursday night from 11 p.m. until Friday morning."

Then Sonia knew that he was caught. His eyes met hers pleadingly. As if she could help. But what could she do? She knew he was innocent. He must know she would save him if she could.

"I spent the evening with Miss Marsh."

"The same Miss Marsh whom you warned Henderson to leave alone?"

"I did not say so."

"What time did you leave there?"

He hesitated. He faltered. "About eleven . . ."

"And then?"

"I went to my shack in Marin County," Franklin declared, defiantly.

"How did you go there, Mr. Crane?"

"In my car. I reached there a little after one o'clock."

"There was some one with you, I presume. Some one who can corroborate your story."

"Unfortunately not. I went alone."

"Mr. Crane, will you explain your reason for driving over to Marin County at midnight of a week night to sleep in a lonely shack?"

Franklin's face was contracted with fear. It was livid, ghastly . . .

But he cried, "I see no necessity for explaining my choice of sleeping quarters."

"It is absolutely necessary unless you wish a warrant issued against you in connection with the drowning of Walter Henderson."

"No! No!" screamed Sonia leaping to her feet. "I will tell you everything."

Her green eyes flashed fire. Bertie thought he could crush her with his malicious testimony, did he? She would show Bertie what it was to love. She lifted her head, insolently.

"You wish to add to the testimony you have already given?"

"Yes. Mr. Crane was with me on Thursday night. He did not leave me at eleven o'clock. I went with him to his shack in Marin County."

"Where you remained all night?"

Her voice did not falter.

"Yes."

The atmosphere became electric, vivified. To Sonia it seemed full of eyes, curious, smirking, indignant. . . . The coroner's voice sounded suddenly flat.

"Very well, Miss Marsh. That will be all."

CHAPTER LXII

WHEN the inquest was over Franklin came to her before them all.

"You shouldn't have done it, Sonia."

Her eyes met his, proudly.

"Do you think I care?"

Then Jed Thomas was saying, "I'm sorry this had to happen. It is very unfortunate."

She did not falter even then. But when they were outside and the reporters flashed their cameras towards her, the first bitter realization came. They believed it, all of them. They thought her testimony had been true. . . . Well, wasn't it typical that she should be thought guilty of something she did not do?

She shrugged and suggested that Franklin go on with the men from the office.

But he cried, reproachfully, "Sonia, I'm going with you."

He led the way to his car and after they had driven away he said, "My God, they would have issued a warrant against me."

"I always knew Bertie would injure you if he could."

"He made things look black," Franklin admitted. "Of course, I could have cleared myself if it came to a trial but it was a ghastly thing to contemplate."

"I couldn't have endured it, Franklin. I would have told anything." Her eyes filled with tears.

"You were wonderful, darling. You are always wonderful, but I did not dream you would sacrifice yourself like that. You shouldn't have done it. I would have denied it but I knew they would think I was lying. If you knew how I love you for your bravery, Sonia! I could kneel in the dust and kiss your feet."

"Nonsense," she smiled, drying her eyes.

He was wild with love and pride of her. When she slipped from the car he kissed her hand.

"Sonia Marsh, I love you better than my own soul."

She did not reply.

Franklin had promised to see her as soon as he could leave the office. Sonia went to her room in the hotel and flung herself on the bed.

God, how she hated Bertie! She felt that she would scream if she ever saw him again. He had forced her to blacken her name in front of all of them. Ah, but it had been sweet to do it for her lover's sake. And no one else must ever know.

After the verdict, Bertie had slunk from the room. She had followed him with arrogant eyes. But he dared not look at her. More than that, Franklin had intimated that the day's testimony would cost Bertie his position with the Thomas Real Estate Co. Jed Thomas had been furious.

She lay, detached, her mind floating back to the scene she had just left. Remembering those silent, desperate prayers of Franklin's. He told her she should not have done it; that he could have cleared himself. But she had seen stark terror in his eyes.

She smiled, maternally. He was like a little boy, whistling in the dark. She understood. . . .

In the afternoon Sonia sent out for the papers. Starting back in dismay as she saw her own face, almost smiling in bold defiance. She winced as she read the things they said about her.

"Beautiful Young Girl Confesses Love to Save Her Sweet-heart." "Admits Spending Night in Lover's Shack." "Lovers' Tryst Exposed at Inquest."

Oh, well, she should worry! It was fair enough. She didn't want them to know the truth.

One headline shouted. "Lover Lies to Save His Sweet-heart's Honor." That brought a bitter smile.

But with the second reading she became quite serious.

Everyone was going to believe her story just as the coroner had believed it. She would be forced to explain to her father and mother. It seemed she was always having to explain something to them. This was going to be hard, but she did not doubt that it could be done.

As for the rest of Stockton, let them think what they liked. They had always suspected she would do something dishonor-

able. All right! She would at last justify their suspicion. Then, for the first time, she remembered Don.

He had not entered her mind at the inquest. But if he had, she knew her course would have been unchanged. She could not ask Don to forgive her. She had lied to protect her lover while married to him. And that was something that could never be explained to him or to his mother. No, she had come rather suddenly to the end.

Her marriage seemed an unreal fancy in the white light of more recent events. It would have ended soon anyway. This merely gave her cause for immediate action. With manicure scissors she cut clippings from every paper. She put them in an envelope and wrote in a large, bold hand, "Don: There is no use. Not even you can keep me out of trouble. Am enclosing clippings which will tell the story better than I can. I take it this frees both of us from all promises. But thanks, Don, dear, for trying to help . . ."

She could not keep back the tears, but she sealed it and inscribed it with the Berlin address that he had left with her.

"That's that," she cried, as she went out to mail it.

When she returned to her room she became conscious of an increasing loneliness. With a sudden, desperate longing, she waited for Franklin to come. She dressed for him with cold, nervous fingers. She sat by the window in deepening twilight, waiting for him to call.

CHAPTER LXIII

THE telephone announced that Mr. Crane was waiting. Sonia gave one glance at the mirror before leaving the room. Her eyes were wide and dark. Expectant! Her mouth was curved like an opening flower. She was conscious of almost frantic relief when she saw him in the lobby. He was paler than usual but winsomely attractive. She thought every woman who saw them must envy her. Her casual words were weighted with a burden of love.

"Where are we going?"

He did not smile as he replied, "Riding."

Her heart began to flutter like a bird with tiny, beating wings. She climbed into his car, conscious that it was a moment fraught with meaning. But she did not ask another question.

She said to herself, "No matter where he takes me, I don't care. . . ."

But she had guessed their destination even before they reached the ferry. When they were on the boat crossing in the darkness to Sausalito she snuggled her hand inside his. Both were steeped in memories of that other crossing. But Sonia felt no fear. The shock of Maxine's death had been obliterated. She was herself again.

They spoke little, each apparently absorbed. When they had left the boat and were on the Corte Madera grade, Franklin said, "It was here."

Sonia shivered. The darkness pressed about the little car, shutting them in. Then he asked, "You know where we are going?"

"Yes."

"Do you care, Sonia?"

She was caught in the swirl of a tremendous current. She knew it was useless to resist. She was moved by an over-

powering impulse. The moment was greater than either of them.

She answered, coolly, "should I care?"

"Well, I decided to take no chances on asking you. You'd probably have said, 'no.'"

Sonia laughed softly.

"You needn't have been afraid. I'm through with evasions."

"Do you mean that, Sonia?"

Her answer flashed like a flame across the night.

They were climbing a hill, curve upon curve, scattered lights twinkling from sooty darkness. The car stopped before the blurred outline of a building, and Franklin was at her side. He lifted trembling, impatient arms.

"Jump, darling."

Her breath came in short, excited gasps. She cried, gaily, "So this is the shack?"

"Be careful. It's blacker than the devil. Hang on to me. I'll turn on the light in a moment."

They stumbled over a doorway. There was the flare of a match, then light from a dangling electric bulb.

Sonia looked about curiously. Dust lay on the tables and chairs but everything was in order. Franklin knelt before the fireplace to light the fire.

They watched in silence as the tiny flame licked at the giant log.

Sonia was determined to show no caution. He had planned for weeks to bring her here. She had no intention of spoiling his triumph. Tomorrow she was going back to Stockton but tonight was tonight, big with uncertainty!

She ran to the cupboard and pulled out pans. The fragrant aroma of coffee began to fill the room. There was the sound of bacon sizzling.

"This reminds me of our day at Pirate's Cove," smiled Sonia.

"I don't know why. It's cold and dark tonight and that day was warm and sunshiny."

"It's the general atmosphere."

"That's different too. We had the world at our feet then. Now we've been through Hell. . . ."

"Even so," insisted Sonia.

"All right, darling. Have it your way."

They ate with bantering which softened into thoughtfulness. When the dishes were washed, Franklin turned off the light and they sat on cushions before the fire.

Conversation seemed stilted beside the crackling of the logs.

"Didn't take that one long to burn."

"No, not once it was started. . . ."

She became restless under the steadiness of his gaze.

"What are you thinking about?"

"It will be time to go soon."

Silence and the soft shifting of charred wood.

Sonia said, quietly, "You haven't kissed me since I came."

"I didn't want you to think that was my reason for bringing you."

"What was your reason?"

His eyes did not waver.

"I've dreamed of it, Sonia. So long! Couldn't let you go without coming. It will give us something to remember. . . ."

Suddenly she could not meet the longing in his eyes. His voice was husky, pleading, behind the commonplace words.

"Not much of a place but you owed it to both of us to see it."

"After the lie I told today?"

"That has nothing to do with it."

"Yes it does," she sighed.

It was lonely outside the circle of his arms. She felt forlorn, deserted.

She said, flatly, "Well, anyway, I'm glad you brought me. . . ."

.

Minutes flying, wasted without kisses. Tomorrow she would be gone. She knew he was waiting for her to touch him. Unless she came to him he would take her back to San Francisco. He was intent on proving the sincerity of his devotion as a reward for the sacrifice she had made.

But his mouth was wistful, pleading without words.

The log was a mass of glowing coals. The darkness was black magic. The tiny warning voices had all ceased. She moved closer and put her hand against his arm.

He swept her to him, crying, "I swore I wouldn't touch you first."

"I know. Did you think I couldn't understand?"

"But you want me to, don't you? You want me to love you?"

"Kiss me."

As their lips met she knew the fight was finished. She had lost, but defeat was glorious!

He whispered, "Sonia, we won't go back?"

Her arms crept higher about his neck. Her eyes closed. . . .

CHAPTER LXIV

CONTRARY to her own expectations, morning brought no regret to Sonia. Her heart sang. At last she had been brave enough to take fate into her own hands. Should there come barren days and empty nights, she had once known exquisite joy. Nothing could snatch the memory from her.

Her eyes were sweet with dreams.

When Franklin asked, anxiously, "Sorry, Sonia?" she tossed her head, and cried, "I'm glad!"

"God, I love you! More than ever, sweetheart. I can't let you go."

"You'll have to, darling. We are going right back to San Francisco and I'm going home this afternoon."

"You can go to Stockton now?"

"It will be easier now, Franklin. I can never be quite so hideously lonely again."

She added, "Anyway you have to go abroad with your mother."

"I don't want to. I can't, that's all."

"But don't you have to?"

"Oh, Lord, I suppose so. I might be able to stall it off for a month or so. Shall I try it, Sonia?"

"No," she insisted, prettily, feeling exceedingly self-righteous. "I'll really have to go home."

They left the shack reluctantly, kissing passionately before they opened the door.

"We'll come again when we're married."

"I hope so. It won't be long. I'm going to be awfully patient."

"Well, I'm not. You'd better get free."

Sonia tasted life to the full that morning. She drank deep draughts of the fresh, clean air. When they reached the ferry they left the car and huddled together in an outside seat. She

loved the sight of San Francisco peering through its veil of fog. It seemed doubly enchanting this morning.

Her exultation carried her to the hotel where she entered, alone. At the desk she found a note, "Stockton calling."

She entered the elevator, frowning. They had seen the papers. But why couldn't they wait until she came home?

"Oh, damn, life is queer. Blamed for something I did not do, then get by with murder and no one knows."

She told herself her one night with Franklin would be like a little fire in her heart. Warming her whole life!"

As she came into her room the telephone rang insistently.

"Stockton is calling."

Yes, it would be her mother, demanding, "Sonia, are you coming home?"

But it was not her mother's voice which answered.

"Who is it?" asked Sonia.

"It's Vera. Something terrible has happened. . . ."

"Tell me, Vera. . . ."

"It's father," sobbed her sister. "He shot himself, Sonia. . . ."

Sonia stood like a mad creature banging at the telephone.

"Operator, give me better connection. I can't hear."

She screamed, "Tell him I'm coming right away. I'll explain everything, Vera."

Her sister's voice came, despairingly, "No, he's dead."

Sonia must have screamed. A maid came running to her door. She opened it, crying, "It's nothing. Just bad news."

She closed it on her sympathy, muttering, "Oh, God, it can't be true."

She saw his anxious, worried face as if he stood beside her. She put her hand over her mouth to choke the cries.

"Oh, I must get hold of myself. I must think. . . ."

At last she went to the telephone and called the real estate office.

In a voice shrill with pain she asked for Franklin. She told him the message, begging "What is the quickest way home?"

His tone was instantly reassuring.

"Pack your things, Sonia. I'll take you in the car. We can make it in three hours."

Afterwards she had no memory of leaving the hotel. She

sat stiff and straight in the seat of Franklin's little car.

"Go faster. Won't you please go faster?" Then, sobbing, "it doesn't matter. He's already dead."

Flying through a canyon, mile after mile of desolate, level road, the car was urged on its way.

"Oh, Franklin, he killed himself on account of that newspaper story. He believed it. How could he have believed it?"

"Darling, don't feel so badly. He couldn't have been in his right mind."

"He has always been so crazy about me. I told him," she cried, almost angrily, tears streaming down her face, "I told him he shouldn't love me so much. I never dreamed he'd believe anything against me."

Something remorseful in Franklin's face made her add, "And it is true now, isn't it? We made it true."

"Sonia, he'd have done it anyway."

She shivered in horror. While she lay oblivious in her lover's arms her father had killed himself, had died believing her guilty.

"And I am," she repeated, stunned. "He had warned me all my life and it hasn't done any good. The one thing he was always afraid of!"

Franklin's voice was ragged with sympathy, tortured with remorse.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry. But if you had been on your way home it would have happened just the same."

"I'm a murderer," she whispered. "I've killed him."

By the time they came to Stockton she had reached dry-eyed despair.

"This is the end of everything, Franklin. You must never try to see me again."

He stammered, "But you'll feel differently when this is over."

"No, there is something evil in me. Anyone who comes near me is doomed."

"That's nonsense, darling. I won't go away without seeing you. I'll wait forever until I hear from you."

She longed to bury her face on his shoulder. But the reason for her father's death stood between them like an angel with a flaming sword.

CHAPTER LXV

As the car sped through Stockton streets, Sonia felt it would have been better to have died than to face the accusations of her mother and Vera.

Franklin left her at her own door.

"I'd rather you didn't come in," she said, "although I do appreciate your bringing me."

"If you're sure there is nothing I can do, I'm going right back."

As he took her hand he whispered, "Remember, I shall be waiting to hear from you."

She opened the door and stepped inside. The sewing machine was quiet. There was no one in the living room. But as Sonia put her suitcase down, she heard broken, desperate sobbing.

Her lips trembled, but she fought back the tears, uncertain as to her family's attitude. They might think she had no right to cry.

She stood as if rooted to the floor, afraid to open the closed door of her mother's room, to face the awful certainty which lay beyond it.

As she watched, fearfully, handkerchief pressed to her lips, Vera came out. Her eyes were swollen with crying. She kissed her sister, saying in a queer, unnatural voice, "Mother, it's Sonia."

If she could only have sunk through the floor! How dared she face the mother she had bereaved? Sonia heard the rustle of her approach and was unable to lift her eyes. Leadened with shame, she could not move. But as Anna's arms closed about her, she burst into frantic tears.

"Mother, I didn't do it."

"Don't lie to me now, Sonia."

Vera had turned away.

"The shame—the dreadful shame you've brought upon us," she sobbed.

"This is no time for reproaches, Vera. Wait at least until your father is in his grave."

Sonia looked at her mother with astonishment. Her face was haggard with grief, but her voice was under perfect control. What an iron will!

Anna continued, "he did it because of the story in the newspaper, Sonia, without a word to anyone. He came in from work and laid the paper on the machine. He didn't say anything, so I didn't look at it. But a moment later I heard the shot from the kitchen." She dried her eyes. "He died without a word to any of us—without a word."

"Oh, Mother, I didn't realize . . . I was coming home to explain . . ."

Futile! Excuses would serve no longer. Her voice faltered.

"I can't bear it. I can't bear to see him . . ."

They permitted her to go into her own room. Her drab, suddenly prim little room, that mocked her with its purity! She lay on the bed and listened, stricken to the heart, to the unfamiliar sounds. Neighbors came and went. The minister! What dreadful things they were all thinking about her—things that were true, now.

.

As twilight fell, the shadows forced Sonia to companionship. She went to the kitchen to beg Anna to give her something to do. Her mother's lack of reproach was like a knife in her heart.

"He was so worried over you, Sonia. Ever since Christmas he had insisted something was wrong. He hadn't slept much lately. The night of the accident he never closed his eyes. He prayed you'd come home."

"Oh, Mother . . ."

"I'm not blaming you, Sonia. I have only myself to blame."

Her eyes were fathomless pools of despair. Sonia could not bear to look at them.

"It wasn't your fault. You'd nothing whatever to do with it."

But Anna shook her head, repeating, sternly, "yes I have. It's a judgment sent on me."

These words frightened Sonia more than her anger would

have. She ran back into her room, feeling the tension tightening about her. It was almost time for her father to come home. But he would never come again. Then she set her lips grimly and crept, alone, into his room.

"Daddy, I didn't dream you'd believe it. I love you, darling. You know I love you . . ."

Never in life had he failed to respond to those words. But he did not answer now, would never answer, never lift a hand to push the hair back from her brow.

"Oh, Daddy . . ."

His hands were folded as they had never been in life—poor toil-worn hands, with broken, blackened nails. She kissed them passionately. They were so cold. Dear God, they were so cold! She flung herself beside him, crying, wildly, "I'll never do it again. I promise I'll never do it again."

But there was no reassuring sense of her father's forgiving spirit—nothing but her own heart-broken sobbing and the presence of Death.

Some one led her away. Some one said, "What a pity it is that we can never learn until it is too late."

She hated the voice that said that. Looking up, she saw it was Mrs. Stillwater, grim with suffering.

Sonia cried, "You needn't worry about Don. We were never really married. It can be annulled."

She sickened at the unrestrained joy which swept his mother's countenance.

"Is that true? Is that the reason you didn't go to Berlin with him?"

"Yes. He didn't want to tell you."

"But why did he marry you, child?"

Oh, she would be generous now. She could afford to be generous if her precious son was safe.

"I talked him into it. He did it to help me."

They were back in Sonia's bedroom. Mrs. Stillwater closed the door.

"Does anyone else know of the marriage, Sonia?"

"Only my mother and one other . . ."

"That man in San Francisco?"

"Yes."

She was surprised to see tears in the older woman's eyes.

"My dear, I'm sorry about this. Don had such faith in you.

I thought he was really in love with you. You're sure he isn't?"

"Not in the least," Sonia repeated, dully. It would be true by the time he had gotten her letter.

"That's all right, then. He's so bighearted, Sonia. No one can understand better than his mother. He has been fighting a battle for some one all his life."

In spite of the utter despair, fatigue, and guilt of her father's death, Sonia thrilled to the pride in Don's mother's voice.

Left alone she thought, "But I've had that, too. Dad loves me more than anything in the world. And I failed him. He had to die knowing that I had failed."

CHAPTER LXVI

BITTER hours followed for Sonia, filled with regret and futile questioning. Why had she not come home without waiting to say farewell to Franklin? Or left the day Don had gone to New York City? If she had only done this or that, everything might have been different.

Wracked with remorse, she achieved no surcease to harrowing self-reproach. How her mother must despise her? Yet she had taken her into her arms. How could she have endured the touch of Sonia's flesh; the touch of a murderer?

Step by step she went over her career, coming at length to the painful conclusion that from "being herself" one result was certain. Walter Henderson had warned her. He had said she would burn her fingers and nothing could stop her. But who had dreamed what wholesale destruction her poor little downfall would cause? Three lives crashing about her! Why shouldn't she have been permitted to destroy herself without involving anyone else?

Toward dawn she fell into exhausted slumber.

The funeral was a small one. Anna had refused to have it held in the church.

"It will give that many more a chance to satisfy their curiosity," she said, firmly. "They won't come here."

So Sam Marsh was buried with only his family and one or two friends to weep about his coffin. Mrs. Stillwater was there, and Sid Owens, his employer for over twenty years.

Sonia was an outcast among them. She felt accusations in their silence; curiosity in their eyes. More than ever she hated them. Because now their suspicions were justified. . . . But it broke her heart to see her father lying in that quiet room, surrounded with flowers—flowers to cover the grief and shame they felt, the tragedy she had caused! She had not

pride enough left to lift her head. She walked to the funeral carriage slightly behind her mother and Vera. A pariah! The reason for her father's suicide!

She stood behind the open grave, choking with tears. She heard Vera's broken sobbing, but did not dare look at her mother's grief-ridden face. But as the first handfuls of earth fell into the grave, Anna stretched a protecting hand to her, drawing her close. Only then did Sonia feel that she had a right to cry.

They returned to a strangely empty house, straightened by kind-hearted neighbors into unfamiliar orderliness. Vera explained that her family needed her. She must go home. She added, "You haven't seen the baby, Sonia. You'd better come over tomorrow."

Sonia knew she was trying to be kind. Her sister had committed an unpardonable sin, but she would do her best to ignore it. Nothing could conceal the hidden reproaches in her eyes. And Paul's attitude was so consciously condescending that Sonia knew the breach would soon be widened into a chasm.

She was glad to be alone with her mother. She ran to help her with her heavy coat. She cried, "Mother, let me make some hot tea?"

But Anna shook her head, saying, drearily, "No. The time has come for us to talk."

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Sonia braced herself. Anything her mother said would be true. She must admit the justification of any charge. But she was surprised when Anna repeated her words of the night before.

"Don't blame yourself too severely, Sonia. This is my punishment, a judgment sent upon me."

Anna's head was flung back, tragically. Two spots of red burned in her cheeks.

"I'm going to tell you something no one else under heaven has ever known—"

Sonia shivered, as her mother's voice dropped into shamed admission.

"Sam Marsh was not your father."

"What do you mean?"

Anna's hand tightened until the blue veins stood out.

"Just that, Sonia. I was untrue to him after we were married. I had run away from boarding school and after Vera came I began to feel suffocated with monotony and poverty. I longed for excitement. In my rebellion against fate, I turned against Sam. I grew so bitter I would not let him touch me. . . . Then there came the other man. He was rich and educated and made love in a half-mocking, restrained fashion that fascinated me. Before I realized it I was madly in love with him. Every barrier was down. We met secretly in the daytime—never at night—for one entire summer."

Sonia stared unbelievably. She knew well that only the conviction of her daughter's equal could ever have forced this admission from Anna Marsh.

"Then," continued Anna, "he went away. Back to the city. It had been only a summer's madness for him. But to me it was everything. I was going to have a child. And when I knew he was going away, making no effort to see me again, with no attempt to keep in touch with me, something in me died. I went back to my husband's arms, swearing no one, least of all, the other man, should ever know. I've kept it all these years, Sonia. Sam never suspected me. He adored you as he never had Vera. I was a wicked fool, but I thought I had paid for it. Every time I saw him kissing you I used to suffer the tortures of hell."

Sonia buried her head in her hands.

"I couldn't have loved him any more if he'd been my real father."

"No, that's true. And I never intended to tell you. But God is punishing me for my sin through you. You have the same longing for romance and freedom that I had before you were born. I have always seen it in you. I wanted to spare you. I've prayed—" Tears trickled down her cheeks. "But there was no use. It was in your blood."

This then was the sinister foreboding she had felt hovering over her. She was begotten in evil, a child without inhibitions, recognizing no law.

"I've told you, Sonia, because I don't want you to blame yourself altogether. My sin was the worst. You're young yet, and if you understand the truth, perhaps it will help you to conquer those impulses—"

"Mother," whispered Sonia, "do I know the man?"

"It was Jed Thomas. The very next Christmas he married Don Stillwater's aunt."

"Jed Thomas—my father?" the girl cried, horrified.

But he couldn't be. She had felt no single emotion in connection with him.

"He doesn't know it," Anna concluded bitterly. "Please God he never will."

CHAPTER LXVII

SITTING on the floor with her head in her mother's lap, Sonia faced the truth. The blood of Jed Thomas might be in her veins but all the affection she could ever give a father had been buried with the pitiful body of the man who had loved her more than his own life. Anna had warned her that she was never to repeat her confession to anyone.

"I've kept it all these years. I never want to discuss it again."

And Sonia, knowing the reason for her mother's confession had been a firm belief in her daughter's guilt, knew that she would never be able to tell the truth of her own affair. After all, it really made no difference which night she had spent in Franklin's shack.

She had reckoned without Anna's acceptance of the fact that she, too, was married.

"Why did you marry Don if you were so in love with some one else, Sonia?"

Sonia swallowed over the lump in her throat before she replied, "I thought I could go with him to Berlin."

"Well, then, why didn't you?"

"I couldn't go on with it. You see, we were only playing at being married. It was more difficult than I imagined."

"You mean you were not really man and wife?"

"Oh, no!"

It was sickening to be forced to explain the details of their relations.

"Well, then," asked Anna, in a dry, practical tone, "what are you going to do?"

"As soon as Don comes home our marriage will be annulled and I'll marry Franklin."

Anna shook her head.

"Do you really believe that?"

Sonia's voice was angry. "Why not? I suppose you think he won't marry me?"

"Those things don't happen, Sonia. Poor child, you'll learn some day not to believe in any lover's promises."

Her spiritless dejection roused the girl to half-hearted defiance.

"You can't judge everyone by your own experience Mother."

She felt that her mother should have known better than to have had faith in Jed Thomas. Even if he were her father, it was ridiculous comparing him to Franklin. Even in youth he must have been cold and unsympathetic.

Anna continued, quietly: "What are your immediate plans?"

"Franklin is going abroad with his mother."

"Are you?"

Until that moment Sonia had not been sure.

"Oh, I'm going back to work in San Francisco."

Afterwards, lying sleepless in her bed, Sonia wondered at her changed state of mind. Was it the result of her mother's confession? The knowledge that her weakness had been inherited? She no longer agonized over the tragedy of her father's suicide. The thought of his patient, pleading eyes would never fail to bring the tears. But she felt now it could not have been avoided. Fate had ordained it many years ago. She, Sonia Marsh, who was not even entitled to the name she bore, had been only a link in the chain of circumstances. How could she have been otherwise, with a mother who had deceived her husband for 19 years?

Her mother's sin seemed to her the greater.

Something pliable and youthful hardened in the girl that night. Anna's confession had swept her from a course of honest repentance to the shoals of self-pity. Eagerly she accepted her mother's statement that she was not altogether to blame. It had been easy to adjust herself to the new idea that she was more sinned against than sinning.

The confession which Anna had brought forth in travail for the salvation of her daughter's soul bore unexpected fruit. Far from fighting her inherited instinct for excitement, Sonia shrugged thin shoulders and was convinced that it would have its way. Why fight destiny?

She said nothing of this attitude to her mother, however.

But she surrounded herself with a silence more baffling than before. Anna, immersed in loneliness and the realization that her husband's savings account would not cover his burial expenses, was compelled to turn to practical considerations.

.

Sonia went to see Vera's baby. She spent unpleasant, restless hours watching Vera boil bottles, wash flannels, measure orange juice, and go through all the maddening routine of a mother's day. She was not tempted by the plain, wholesome fare her sister put before her family. She did not relish holding a squalling infant while Vera prepared its bath. The house was filled with a damp, acrid odor, which nauseated Sonia. Babies were darling in pink and blue bonnets, smelling of sachet, but before they attained that stage . . . !

It added to her irritation that Vera plainly considered herself a young Madonna permitting an unholy Magdalene to hold her child.

Sonia walked home, taking deep breaths of the moist, spring-haunted air, careless but not unconscious of glances from those who knew.

"There goes Sonia Marsh, whose father killed himself. It was in the papers . . ." Buzz-buzz—

When she entered her own home she found her mother back at the sewing machine.

"Do you have to do that, Mother?"

"Well, I promised it for Saturday. I'd rather sew than to sit here thinking. Besides, I need the money."

That was Sonia's cue. She took it gratefully.

"If you don't mind, I'm going back to work, too. I'm going tomorrow."

CHAPTER LXVIII

SONIA's mother was uneasy. But since her husband's death Anna seemed to have become more taciturn.

She said, "Sonia, I have told you the truth. You know the price all of us have to pay. . . . But I can't follow you to San Francisco. If you're going to go wrong now all my watching couldn't stop you. It's up to you."

Sonia kissed her. But some hidden, secret loyalty to Sam Marsh, who would always seem her father, pushed between them. Anna had forgiven Sonia for the death of her husband but the unchastened youth in the girl could not quite forgive the more serious loss of her father. Sonia would never have admitted it but she knew that Anna suspected the truth. And that suspicion was like an open wound. . . .

Back in San Francisco, Sonia went at once to a hotel. Having disposed of her baggage, she hastened to the Thomas Real Estate Co. Franklin was not there, but it was Jed Thomas she wished to see.

Secure in the knowledge that he had never suspected her mother's secret, she examined her emotions to see if she felt a single spark of relationship. But there was nothing. So far as she was concerned, the man was alien. No slightest tie!

He seemed embarrassed to see her. With lifted eyebrows, he inquired the reason of her return.

"My father is dead," Sonia declared brusquely, not daring to let the thought of Sam Marsh enter her mind. "There is no money, and I should like my old position again."

Mr. Thomas expressed polite condolence.

She waved it aside.

"Is my place already filled or do I get it?"

He cleared his throat and examined faultless fingernails.

"Miss Marsh, I hope you will not think me in any sense critical. But the recent publicity concerning the death of Walter Henderson has been most unfortunate for the company. I

appreciate your position in the matter. Your conduct is essentially your own affair. But the truth is it would be most inadvisable for us to take you back at this time."

Her cheeks flushed scarlet. Her lips parted. She stammered, "Oh, I'm sorry. I'd no idea you'd feel like that about it . . ."

His lifted hand stopped her at the door.

"It is most unfortunate and in no way a reflection on you. We have asked Mr. Donahue to resign and he has left the company. If Mr. Crane leaves, as he has planned"—he glanced at her keenly—"I am sure we can arrange to have you with us again."

"No, you won't!" blurted Sonia, feeling prickly all over, as if stung by hundreds of burrs. "I should never have asked to come in the first place."

Through the deepening color on his cheeks, he endeavored to qualify his ultimatum.

"Let us say you come in a month if Mr. Crane is gone?"

"No!"

"Then we will give you a recommendation."

"No," she insisted hysterically, "you won't give me anything."

She flew out of the door, realizing that for once he was much disturbed.

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Franklin was at his desk, but she swept through the office. She felt driven by anger and shame. As she walked down Sutter Street she was being lashed unmercifully. Then she heard Franklin's voice.

"Sonia, what's the matter?"

She faced him, her green eyes blazing.

"I've been hearing how disreputable I am."

"What do you mean?"

"Jed Thomas tells me I'm not good enough for his real estate office."

His tone was shocked as he replied, "Darling, he didn't mean it that way. Can't you see his point of view? However, if that's the case I'll get out myself tomorrow."

His concern placated her, although she stormed, "You will not! I wouldn't work for him now if he begged me to . . ."

He asked her in a curiously chastened voice, "Do you love me, Sonia? It seems ages since you went away."

Again the old, sweet thrill! The excitement running riot through every vein. The desire to kiss him which swept her like a flame.

Her eyes met his solemnly. "I do love you, Franklin."

He threw back his head.

"God! Say it again. Shout it! Sing it! I've been through hell—wondering . . ."

She remembered that she had told him she never wanted to see him again. Thank God he had not taken it seriously! They walked in silence until he said, "Sonia, the shack is waiting. Will you come?"

Blind with tears, she nodded. What did it matter? Hadn't she done all the damage she could? The cards had been stacked against her long before her birth. Long ago in that summer when Jed Thomas had made half-bantering love to another man's romance-starved wife . . .

She brushed the tears away and cried, "Why not? Why shouldn't I come?"

CHAPTER LXIX

THIS time they drove to the shack in a heavy rain. It seemed appropriate for the world to be drenched in tears. Sonia gazed solemnly into the steady downpour. Franklin drove carefully and for the first time since her father's death she felt the pain in her heart relax. There was mystery in the dripping blackness of the night, intoxication in the fleeting caress of her lover's hand. His love seemed the only reality. The shack was like a beacon set on a hill. It was their journey's end and held all the comfort for which she longed. It beckoned with an invisible hand. They ran through the rain into the house. The air was musty. But she crept into his arms. He kissed her rapturously.

"It's been so long . . ."

"Oh, darling, I love you! Being here is all that matters."

"And tomorrow?" he questioned, pressing her closer to his rough, rain-dampened coat.

"I want to forget that there will ever be a tomorrow."

The fire roared in the fireplace. There was healing in the wind-driven rain. The monotonous, insistent dripping was like music. For the first time since the Sunday in Pirate's Cove, when they had kissed with such clean, sweet joyousness, they seemed to attain perfect understanding.

Sonia was no longer tortured with doubt. No one could have made her believe he did not love her. His kisses were long and fierce, but his arms were gentle. They sat together in the one large chair, and he rocked her as if she were a little girl.

"These have been hard days for you, sweetheart."

She shivered.

"Ghastly. I can't talk about them, even to you. It took something from me," Sonia was thinking of her mother's secret.

"I'll never be the same again."

"Yes, you will," he comforted. "Why, you couldn't be downhearted long. I understand you, Sonia. Your moods are like the wind."

She pressed the softness of her cheek against his hair.

"Would you love me sad and unhappy?"

"Sad or unhappy, ill, even angry . . . there is no condition in which I wouldn't love you . . ."

She laughed with the sheer ecstasy of his protestations. Even if they were not altogether true, it was delicious to hear him avow it. She trailed a teasing finger inside his collar.

"If I were old and feeble? Cross and sharp-nosed?"

"Stop tickling! I'll take a bite right out of this ear."

"But would you?"

"Sure I would, although I've no idea what you said. Kiss me—kiss me—kiss me!"

They kissed slowly, to the accompaniment of the rain.

Long hours dream filled! An island in a storm-tossed sea. Sonia rested as in an interlude. Eventually life must go on. But tonight . . . !

.

The next morning Sonia swept the shack and put everything in shining orderliness. It was Saturday, and they decided to stay until Sunday evening. So Franklin descended to Fairfax for food, and Sonia went singing about her work, until the thought of her father silenced her. Yet in those few hours her lover had become so incredibly dear . . . even death was powerless beside her infatuation.

She slipped her feet inside his bedroom slippers, swaggering about the room. His most inanimate possessions took on physical attributes. She buried her face in an old coat and came up starry-eyed. She told herself, seriously, that he was the most perfect lover in the world. Then she began to worry over the length of time he had been away.

When he strode, whistling, into the small enclosure about the house, she flew to meet him, tripping over the slippers she had forgotten to remove.

"You precious idiot, what's the matter with you?"

"You were gone such ages . . ."

He dragged her inside and kissed her wildly.

"Do you know, I thought I'd never get back! It seemed to

me the shack must be blazing with the glory of your presence. What the devil? Take off my shoes!"

The enchanted hours slipped by. The rain ceased. By Sunday afternoon the trees were shining through silvery veils.

She said regretfully, "Well, it's almost over. We'll have to be going back."

"What are you going to do, Sonia?"

"What can I do but hunt for a position?"

"If you'll come back to the office, I'll leave. I was quitting anyway in a few days."

She looked up sharply. "When, exactly?"

"We had planned to go the 15th of March. But I've been putting mother off until you came back. If I can persuade her to go east for a month, I may be able to put it off indefinitely."

She studied him, longingly.

"You mean you wouldn't have to go at all?"

He did not smile as he answered, "It's impossible for me to go now. I can't leave you, Sonia."

She would have run into his arms then, proudly, before the whole world. But later, on the boat to San Francisco, she asked:

"What will your mother think? Won't it make her ill again?"

"I don't care what she thinks. She's better now. Besides, I'm making more money than I ever did in my life. She ought to be glad I'm sticking to business."

"And Genevieve Erickson?" she inquired timidly.

"Past history, sweetheart. I was a fool to let mother buffalo me for so long."

CHAPTER LXX

THE day forced Sonia to a realization of her situation. She had less than \$50 of her own. To be sure, that did not include the money Don had deposited to her account. But she told herself that she would never touch that. A room at the hotel was expensive. She was conscious now of the necessity of quarters where she could receive Franklin. She thought of the apartment she had shared with Maxine, but some inner sentiment prevented her going to see if it were vacant. Those days were over. The fewer reminders the better, even if it had not been too much of a responsibility to swing alone. In the end she rented a much cheaper place on Fillmore Street. The neighborhood was not beautiful. Indeed, she had doubts of its respectability.

"Which is just as well," shrugged Sonia, conscious of a strange, new bitterness settling about her heart.

It was late afternoon when she called Franklin to give him her address.

His voice over the telephone was like a drink of water to her thirsty soul.

"I'll be out for a minute on my way home."

By the time he came she had the room in dingy orderliness. Nothing could make it cheerful, not even the bunch of daffodils he presented. But at least it was a shelter.

He took her in his arms, pityingly.

"Lord, I hate to see you here."

"It's the best I can do."

"If you'd let me help, Sonia . . ."

She put her hand across his lips.

"Absolutely not. 'A poor place, but mine own,'" she laughed.

"But Sonia, it's so drab. None of the beauty your soul craves."

"I know, but it may be only temporary. If I get something to do that pays enough, I'll move."

"That reminds me," he said uneasily, "Jed Thomas asked me for your address."

"You didn't give it to him?"

"What else could I do? He knew I had it. Perhaps he's going to reconsider his harsh words."

"He can go to," she cried, fiercely. "I'd walk the streets before I'd work for him."

He left, asking her to meet him for lunch.

Sonia sat with her feet perched on the oven door. After the comfortable warmth of Franklin's shack, the room seemed bitterly cold. She looked about, wondering how she could have chosen a place so devoid of color. Even the living room in Stockton had a certain homely comfort. This had no note of brightness save the frail daffodils, shivering in the gloom.

In the morning she intended to start the search for a position. A pair of freshly washed stockings hung over a chair. Her best foot must be foremost, although she felt she was in no condition to meet strangers, much less to ask for a position which she did not really desire. If only she and Franklin were married and had a little home of their own! How happy she would be! How clean and thrilling their relations! She would be willing to work all day, serene in the knowledge that he would be coming at night . . . her husband!

It occurred to her, faintly, as a memory from a dream, that she had a husband, one who would have given her everything. Eyes somber and remote, she corrected herself—everything but the mad excitement which Franklin roused. Wasn't that worth any luxury? For him she would endure any sacrifice, any humiliation, even live day after day in this dreary, unsightly room.

She remembered the emotion she had felt when she gazed at the skyline of San Francisco, the dreams she had had. Then she saw again the pathos of her father's patient face . . . Sighing she went to bed.

Before she had time to get away the next morning, Jed Thomas came. Cold and irrepachable as ever, he entered her little room.

"Have you found a position yet?"

"No," she replied, uncompromisingly.

His colorless voice continued:

"I thought perhaps I might be able to do something for you. A friend of mine needs a bookkeeper.

Sonia's green eyes met his icily.

"Mr. Thomas, there is no necessity for you to disturb yourself about me."

"I should be glad to help you if I can. I regret the unpleasant situation as much as anyone. There is no reason why I shouldn't be of service to you."

"No reason why you should."

His eyes narrowed.

"None, indeed, save the fact that you are a young girl my nephew was interested in."

Sonia rose. The color was sweeping in waves across her cheeks. Her eyes were stormy.

"I see no reason for prolonging the agony. I asked for my old position and you did not see fit to give it to me."

"I am sure you can understand my position in the matter."

"Oh, surely," she agreed sweetly, "I understand, and I also release you from any false sense of obligation."

He was watching her uneasily. She knew he was assuring himself that of course she could know nothing of his old relations with her mother. Still one could not be too cautious.

"I doubt if you can secure another position without recommendations."

"Don't let that bother you. I assure you I'll find something."

He retreated in good order, with no sign of defeat. But Sonia was furious.

"He would condescend to help me, would he? Well, I'll show him I can get along without assistance from anyone."

A sensation of faintness swept over her.

"That was my father."

Her father, whose cold repression had always struck an answering coldness in her. Steel upon steel! Her expression had been as baffling and secretive as his.

"I'm no single bit of him!" she raged. "And he owes me nothing. I despise him."

CHAPTER LXXI

WEEKS dragged by. Sonia forced herself to leave the room every morning and make some pretense of searching for employment. But there was no heart in her asking. She knew before she had received the reply that there would be "nothing just now."

In the evenings Franklin came. His mother had finally been persuaded to go east. Although he assured Sonia that this was a distinct concession on her part, she failed to wax enthusiastic.

He accused her, half jokingly, of not desiring to marry him. "Oh, you know I do," she replied. "But there is so much to be undone first that the idea doesn't mean anything."

The weekends at the shack were like a release from prison. Although Franklin was now free to spend as much time with her as he liked, the drabness of the room in San Francisco seemed to tarnish their love. It was both depressing and irritating to see her against such a background.

She permitted Franklin to pay for the food when he came for dinner, but she could not accept other financial aid from him. One night when she had figured until she was dizzy, she decided she would have to use some of the money Don had left. She consoled herself with the thought that she would pay every penny back before he returned. After all, it was a gift. In her heart she knew he would never permit her to return it, and its solid substance gave her new courage. Of course she would find employment soon. There must be a job for her somewhere.

It was almost a month since Don had gone. She thought of him often, but with such pain that she pushed him from her mind. One night she woke to see his kind, perplexed eyes staring from the darkness. She knew it was an illusion but she put her hand across her mouth to keep from screaming. She told herself that he was no longer concerned with what

she did. He had received her letter by now as well as the report from his mother.

But sleep had become impossible. She turned on the gas to warm the room and made hot cocoa. At that moment she would have given anything to have heard Don whisper, "Never mind, honey. I understand."

Yet when Franklin came the next evening, she flung herself into his arms, crying, "Love me. Kiss me. Make me forget."

"Forget what, sweetheart?"

"Oh, the mess we've made of things. The difference between the lives we lead and what we intended to do."

"Aren't you happy?"

"When you're here, yes," she sighed. "But everything seems different when you're away."

He kissed her tenderly and held her in his arms. He seemed more serious in his affection. There was no cruelty about him now. It was her own moodiness which disturbed their relations.

Another night he found her so restless and melancholy that he said, "Sonia, I'm afraid you've stopped caring."

She shrugged, petulantly. "I should think you would suspect me of that. I've done nothing to prove I love you."

"Darling, you know better than that. But you haven't been like yourself for so long. You're so tense and dramatic."

Tears filled her eyes.

"Why wouldn't I be? Look at the last six weeks and see if I haven't had reason to change."

"Not in your love for me?" he asked, meeting her eyes with the old sweet pleading.

She said, sadly, "You're right, dear. And when you're away I simply ache to see you again. I don't know why I should feel blue."

"Well, let's not tonight. Shall we go somewhere and dance? How about Gianduja's?"

The suggestion pleased Sonia. She ran to change into the silver gown. It made her eyes inviting and mysterious. She applied rouge with a skillful hand, and as she dressed her spirits rose. Why should she feel low? Had she not won for a lover the man she had sighed to meet, months ago?

She danced in his arms, light as a leaping flame. She smiled at him from lowered, seductive lids.

"I do love you," she whispered, exultant with the instant answering blaze her words aroused.

She told herself she was years older and wiser than the Sonia who had worn pink chiffon and trembled at his nearness.

"But do you love me as much?" she asked when they were seated.

He lighted a cigaret with nervous fingers.

"As much as what, Sonia?"

"As you did the first night we danced together?"

His eyes blazed blue fire.

"I love you more every hour you live. Every inch of your body, every finger and toe. . . ."

She thrilled to the passion in his voice.

"I want you to. That's the way I have to be loved."

Later, close in his arms, she whispered, "I'm happy now. . . ."

The next day she received a cable from Don bristling with one word.

"Coming."

At first it failed to register. Then she re-read it, painfully. Coming! Coming back as soon as he had arrived? But for what? To restore her freedom? Or to reproach her for unfaithfulness?

"Oh," thought Sonia, sadly, "what that message might have meant, if things were different."

Of course she did not love him! He was nothing to her, although the very thought of him made her cry.

"But I won't see him," she sobbed. "We have nothing to say to each other."

As the days wore on she knew she would have to see him, to explain once more.

CHAPTER LXXII

SONIA was not sure when Don would arrive, but the knowledge that he was hastening home from Berlin—whatever his reason—increased her restlessness. It became almost impossible for her to remain inside her dingy room, equally impossible to walk the streets, hunting a position. Twice she was told another girl had won the place an hour earlier. For some reason her self-confidence was shattered. Each time she had to force herself into an office with increased agony. She found her attitude becoming apologetic. She was sure they would not employ her if they knew the truth. She refused, when urged, to give recommendations.

She told herself the time was coming when she would cease trying. The fear of this drove her to fresh effort. In the meantime she was drawing every week from the money Don had deposited for her. She did not tell Franklin of the cable from her husband. She knew he was deeply concerned over her depression, although she made an effort to conceal it. There were times when she laughed and sang with traces of the old joyousness. But it was forced. Only the weekends in the shack in Marin county found her really normal.

There she cooked and cleaned and loved with renewed vigor. The rudely finished shack was like a little shrine. She came to it a footsore pilgrim, praying for peace.

One day in April, when the air was luminous with spring, Sonia came back to her room, laden with packages. The fragrant air made her feel light and buoyant. Franklin was coming for dinner and she planned to have broiled steak and a fresh combination salad. Cooking always interested her. She was humming as she came up the stairs. But when she opened her door she paused, dumbfounded. Franklin was lying asleep upon the bed.

"Franklin, are you ill? What's the matter?"

He opened his eyes and closed them again.

"What's wrong, dear?" she repeated.

He sat up then, smiling his charming, magnetic smile.

He yawned. "Must have been asleep."

"You certainly were," Sonia affirmed anxiously. "And it's only 2 o'clock. Why aren't you working?"

"Too tired to work. My Lord, Sonia, you're a regular slave driver. I haven't had a day off for weeks."

"Why take one today?" she continued heartlessly. Putting her packages on the table, she smiled. "You know I don't mean that. I have been awfully proud of the way you've been sticking to it."

"You should be. I've made a lot of money the last month, darling."

"I know you have, and I want you to keep pegging away. We'll need a lot."

He asked, almost sullenly, "When will we? When is this husband of yours coming back?"

Sonia did not reply. She was loathe to part with her meager information. Franklin began to pace the room.

"I'm tired of not knowing where I stand. This is a hell of a situation."

She stammered, "Why, I thought you liked it."

"Did you? That's because you've been feeling too sorry for yourself to think about my side of it. I may as well tell you now it isn't much fun to take you out any more. You look like a thundercloud."

Sonia removed her hat, asking carefully, "Is that really the way I look to you?"

"A lot of the time it is. I come up here feeling low myself, but instead of cheering me up, you absolutely saturate me with gloom."

"That's awfully inconsiderate of me, isn't it? It must be quite a disappointment."

He warmed to the subject. "You're damned right it is. It's a shame, and if I weren't so big-hearted I wouldn't stand for it."

Not until then did suspicion cross her mind. She went to him, putting cautious hands upon his shoulders.

"Franklin, you've been drinking . . ."

"Supposing I have?"

She smiled nervously. "If you have, that explains your very rude behavior."

"My behavior doesn't need any explanation," he insisted belligerently. "It's God's truth I'm telling you. And telling you for your own good. I wish you'd cheer up."

She watched him lunging across the room, kicking at the furniture. Then she asked, "Have you been to the office at all today?"

"Who wants to know?"

She rose then and, going up to him, said, coldly, "Don't be insulting, Franklin Crane, even if you are drunk. I want to know, and I expect to be answered. You have no reason to be angry with me."

He seized her in his arms, crying fervently, "You're right, darling, much. I've loved you too much from the beginning. I warned you . . . I told you something would happen."

But she cut his flood of protestations short with a repetition of her question, to which he replied sorrowfully, "No, I haven't been to the office. I feel too low."

She led him back to the bed, humoring him as if he were a child.

"Go to sleep and you'll feel better. I've planned such a good dinner . . ."

"Can't eat a thing."

"Maybe you can when you wake up. I'll make some coffee."

A moment later he was sleeping.

She watched him, alarmed and disturbed. She had believed him cured of drinking, at least to excess. But she knew that under the influence of liquor he had told her the truth. He was tired of her gloom and depression. He had expressed a secret resentment which no doubt he had harbored for weeks. Shocked and disillusioned, she still told herself she should have made more of an effort to be a jolly companion. She had no idea her restlessness had affected her looks.

While he slept, she ran to the mirror and examined her features.

"It's true," she admitted reluctantly.

Her red mouth was sullen, her eyes pensive and brooding. A haunting face, but melancholy . . . She drew back in dismay.

"When did I change so? I can't look like that."

Her features were thinner, sharpened as if by pain.

It came to her suddenly that Vera's face had looked like that. But poor Vera had reason. She smiled at her reflection.

"It's nothing like that. I'm nervous and unstrung since Daddy died."

Who wouldn't be nervous after three deaths in quick succession, all closely connected with her own life? But she would make a renewed attempt to be cheerful. Deliberately smiling, she turned her back on her reflection.

CHAPTER LXXIII

By the time Franklin woke, Sonia had a pot of coffee bubbling on the stove. The salad was crisply cold, the steak swimming in butter. It was an appetizing little meal, set forth temptingly on the small table. A gay yellow and red tulip smiled from the window and Sonia felt cheerful and brave with her resolution.

"Feeling better?" she smiled.

He groaned.

"My head's bursting. Give me some aspirin, will you?"

She produced the box, smoothing his hot forehead with cool fingers. He held them pressed against his brow.

"Was I cross to you, sweetheart?"

"You were brutally frank," she admitted. "But they say there is truth in liquor, so no doubt you've thought it for weeks."

"Thought what? My God, what did I say?"

"That I am a thundercloud, saturating you with gloom."

He pulled her down beside him.

"I'm sorry. I feel so damned low."

"Why are you low, Franklin? Is it because of me? I know I haven't been much fun lately."

"You certainly haven't," he admitted. "It kills me to see you unhappy—"

"Is that all that worries you?" Perhaps there was more trouble with his mother or financial difficulties which she did not understand.

But her question aroused instant irritation.

"What else would it be? For God's sake don't get suspicious—"

She gazed at him, surprised. "Suspicious of you? Why should I be?"

Like a petulant child he flung himself across the bed. . . .

The days grew warmer. Flowers sparkled like hidden jewels from tiny fence-enclosed yards. The sun wooed hotly, a determined lover. Sonia found herself longing for country roads.

The weekends in the shack on Manor Heights were like a miracle reviving her soul. She began to plan for Friday, each Sunday coming home. Franklin had given up working on Saturdays.

"Don't accomplish anything anyway," he said, defensively. And because it meant an extra night in the quiet darkness of the country, Sonia did not demur.

The Friday after their quarrel, he promised to come for her at 5 o'clock. Long before then she was ready, sitting before the window, rocking back and forth. Outside was the noise and clamor of Fillmore Street. The sun burned through the dingy glass. Her head ached and she was fighting an oppression which became heavier each day.

"I'll be all right when I get away from these damned rooms," she thought, violently.

It seemed unfair that she, a devotee of beauty, should be forced to live here day after day. Less than a year ago, adventure had opened before her. She might have worn Walter Henderson's emerald and been mistress of his home. She might have gone on a ship with Don. But love had seemed more wonderful.

"And it is," she insisted. "I would choose it every time. It's only that I deserve a more beautiful setting."

She heard a step approach her door, and thought it must be Franklin. But when she opened it she found a letter from her mother. Anna wrote as she talked, sparingly. She hoped Sonia was feeling better and had found work.

"I don't understand how you managed to save enough to live on for so long. But it's a good thing. I am having rather a hard pull myself just now. But there will be plenty of spring sewing to do. If you need any help you must be sure to let me know."

Admiration filled Sonia's heart. Her mother was no whiner. There was not a word about Jed Thomas, although Sonia had told her of his visit to offer his aid.

"She's a good sport," her daughter admitted. In time, per-

haps, they would attain even more than their old relations, but the wounds were too fresh to permit it now.

The alarm clock indicated 5 o'clock. Sonia put on hat and coat sure that Franklin must be on his way. But the moments dragged into an hour. He was seldom late, although she remembered he had kept them waiting for several hours on that first fatal party.

Her heart sank as the roar of the traffic increased beneath her window. Later and later! When he did come would she dare to go with him?

She waited, biting her lips with impatience, sickening at the crawling moments. It must be 8, although the clock showed 5 minutes of 7. She saw the shadows deepening about her. It was entirely dark when he entered the room.

"Are you furious, darling?"

"Well, what was keeping you? Why couldn't you telephone?"

"A fellow wanted to look at a house."

He waved his arms with such emphasis that she knew he was lying. She advanced to him, furiously. "You've been drinking again, you mean."

"I should say not. On my honor, Sonia, I'm as right as rain."

His fatuous smile disgusted her. Tears of disappointment rose to her eyes.

"You might have stayed sober on our night to go to Marin county."

"Well, you're going to go. Don't cry before you're hurt."

"I'm not going with you," she cried, angrily. "Do you think I'd ride with you after what happened the other time?"

"Suit yourself. If you think I can't take one drink and drive an automobile, why, you deserve to walk!"

She wailed, "I want to go so badly. I've counted on it all week. I can't stand to stay in this place. . . ."

"Let's go then."

"Not with you," she flared. "I'm going alone."

CHAPTER LXXIV

FRANKLIN remonstrated with her, but in vain. When he saw that she actually intended to go alone, he asked, "How are you going to get there?"

"On the train to Fairfax. Then I can take the Incline Railroad up Manor Heights. Don't think I don't know how to get there. Why should I let you spoil my weekend?"

"I'm sorry, Sonia. Don't you want me to come, too?"

"No," she replied cuttingly. "Why should I have you lying around half drunk?" She added, "I was nice about it the first time. I didn't say a word, did I?"

"No, you were a good little sport."

"Well, I'm not going to be again. I don't love you in that condition. If drinking means so much to you, why, stay here and drink."

He swayed against the table. Tears of self-pity rose to his eyes.

"You're cruel, Sonia."

"Maybe I am. There's no use discussing it. You won't remember what you've said tomorrow anyway."

He tried to put his arms about her, but the glassy expression of his eyes infuriated her. She pushed him into a chair.

"Leave me alone. I don't want your drunken caresses."

"I know girls who aren't so particular . . ."

"Go find them then. Don't waste time on me. And now go, because I'm locking up!"

He rose, walking not too steadily.

"You'll be sorry for this . . ."

"So will you. What a wonderful lover you are!"

He jumped into his car and departed, furiously. And Sonia, bitter with resentment, took a street car to the ferry and, much later, arrived at the shack.

The key was under the doormat. She entered, sniffing the close air. She threw open the windows and turned on the

feeble light, feeling the cool balm of the place steal softly into her soul.

Dear little shack filled with memories that would always be sacred! She would come and rest in her dreams. It would have been sacrilege to bring Franklin with a drunken smirk on lips that had kissed hers so tenderly.

She made tea and sandwiches, feeling faint with hunger. Her eyes stared from the cracked mirror like charred holes in her white face. They frightened her, they looked so wild.

As she sat by the fire she let herself relax to its friendly crackle. It hurt that Franklin should start drinking again. Why couldn't he be satisfied with their love? But was she satisfied? When had she ever felt such gnawing discomfort as she had known the last few weeks? At last, yawning with weariness, she turned out the light and went to bed.

She was wakened by the panting of a car. Leaning on one arm, she looked out to see it stopping before the door. Even in the darkness, she was sure it was Franklin. She lay, almost suffocated with fright.

Why had he come? If he had drunk more, he might be dangerous. She knew her departure had angered him. What a fool she had been to come up here alone. It was his shack. Why shouldn't he follow her?

He jumped from the car and came to the door. His face was a white blur in the half light. He turned the handle of the door softly.

She waited until she could endure the silence no longer. Her voice burst from her throat, "Franklin!"

"Open the door, Sonia."

"No, I won't. Go away."

He came to the window and pressed his face against the screen.

"Don't be frightened, darling. I'm all right."

The tenderness in his voice reassured her. Suddenly she felt she must bring him in. She flew to the door, flinging herself into his arms, sobbing, "I was so frightened!"

He was entirely sober now. He soothed her with apologetic little pats.

"Don't cry, sweetheart. It's no wonder you were so frightened. What a brute I've been."

"I hated you!" she cried, arms tight about his neck. "I swore I'd never kiss you again. What's wrong with us, Franklin? What makes us act this way?"

He was kissing her with soft, sighing kisses—kisses like a butterfly's wing. His voice was a song of love flooding her aching, disillusioned heart.

"I love you, Sonia. I've made up my mind to stop drinking."

Her eyes were wet with tears. She held his face between her hands.

"Will you do that for me, Franklin? Can you?"

"Of course I can. I don't really care so much for it, Sonia. I do it to be sociable. I can leave it alone."

She would believe him. Oh, she would! How he loved her, to come after her like this, with promises and kisses, after she had screamed at him like a termagant! She swayed in his arms, feeling the room reel about her. Surely, surely it would all come right. She loved him so much . . .

CHAPTER LXXV

DAYS lengthened into weeks. In spite of renewed attempts at cheerfulness, Sonia's inward perturbation grew. Don was coming and she had used almost half the money he had left for her, knowing that now she was not entitled to a penny of it. Yet for some reason it seemed more decent to accept it from him than from her lover.

Meanwhile her search for a position had become a farce. There were mornings when she sat until noon in her room, vainly trying to acquire the self-confidence she lacked. She would face herself in the mirror, desperately.

"But you must get something. Any number of other girls are finding places every day. They are open if you look long enough."

The green eyes stared back so hopelessly that her heart failed. She knew she would never find anyone who wanted her while she looked like that. Her hands were icy with nervousness. All the blood seemed slowly to recede from her brain.

"I'll faint if I go out on the street like this," she would decide. "I really feel ill."

In the end she would remove her hat and lie down. But she could not relax. She said, "When the clock says 10:30 I'll start."

But when the hands were almost there she cried in fresh panic, "That's too soon. I'll make it 11."

At a quarter of eleven she would decide that it was too near noon. She would prepare her lunch and that would make her feel more fit for the struggle. Many days she did not reach the street at all.

But no matter how depressing the day, she managed to be brilliant and vivacious at night. At 4 o'clock she drank a cup of hot tea and smoked a cigaret. Her dressing was accompanied by rising spirits. By the time Franklin came she was glowing and radiant. Ready for any suggestion.

And she was rewarded by his increased infatuation.

"You look like a million dollars."

"Not saturated with gloom any more?"

"I'll say not. You're beautiful, Sonia. More beautiful than you have ever been."

She thrilled to his praise, although she shivered, sometimes, to think what it had cost. Yet was it not worth it, to have him telephone "Hello, sweetheart! I just wondered what you were doing?"

Most wonderful of all was the fact that so far as she knew, he had kept his promise. She had everything she wanted to complete her happiness, everything! Then why did she sigh, admitting it? Why the deepening depression which greeted her each morning? The fear that startled her from sleep?

If only Don would arrive so that things might be settled. She understood that an annulment was much quicker to obtain than a divorce. The prospect of scenes with Don, with Franklin, with her mother, sapped her already weakened vitality.

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Walking down Market Street at noon, meeting the girls who poured from shops and offices, she wondered how all of them had obtained positions. There must be a secret in it she did not understand. Surely all the employers in San Francisco had not read her story. Could there be a conspiracy against giving her work? Or was it Fate, that malignant old harriidan, who had hounded her since birth?

She caught wisps of conversation.

"And he said," "And I says to him." "And he says," "My Gawd . . ."

Not so long ago, she and Maxine had swept down the streets at noon, giggling and whispering secrets.

Her heart ached for the companionship of another girl, some one who would not expect her to be gay all the time. Yet girls had never meant a great deal to Sonia.

One day she hurried home, although it was only 12 o'clock. She had inquired at an agency where she had left her name and been informed that there was "nothing doing."

"There's no use," she said to herself, "too look any more today."

She flew back to the dingy refuge of her four walls. Her hands trembled as she ate. She felt haunted by the necessity

of obtaining work. She would wait one more week then she would be forced to take anything. It might be that no one happened to need a bookkeeper. But something better, perhaps, was just around the corner, even if it did not pay so much . . .

She felt better after eating, and flung herself on the bed to fall into an exhausted sleep. The telephone woke her. Franklin jeered at her sleep-sodden voice.

"Sonia, let's go to the palace tonight."

"That will be lovely," she cried, with all her old enthusiasm, although she would have preferred sitting quietly at home. It seemed to her that Franklin was insatiable, wanting to do something exciting every night, restless if they stayed at home. But she met him with pink cheeks and sparkling eyes.

Like a great green butterfly, she swayed and shimmered in his arms, thrusting back every annoying obsession, forcing lightness to her feet, sauciness to her replies. On the way home she snuggled against him, responding to his caresses through weariness that swept her in waves. In bed she tumbled down a sliding tunnel to forgetfulness, sighing with relief. When morning came she fainted as she rose.

Panic was in her return to consciousness. She felt so ill, so exhausted mentally . . . Creeping back between the blankets she lay, tortured by faintness and by a suspicion, which began to flame into certainty. She was too familiar with Vera's oft-recurring symptoms not to recognize them in herself. She had suspected it weeks before. Since she had examined her pain-sharpened features in the mirror, the idea had coiled like a serpent, ready to spring. When she fainted, it fastened deadly fangs which could not be withdrawn.

CHAPTER LXXVI

SONIA faced the facts grimly. No use weeping over her condition or moaning with remorse. This was the chance she had taken the first time she snatched at her freedom. Because it had not occurred to her then made it none the less possible. Her challenge to fate had been accepted. The gauntlet was lifted. The fight was on.

"Well, I must be sensible," she repeated again and again. "There is a way out of every difficulty—if I can just keep cool enough to think."

But to think was difficult, with the room swaying about her. She was so ill that nothing seemed to matter save a moment's respite. She held her breath and, with closed eyes, lay very still . . .

Later she was able to reach the kitchen and prepare breakfast. This revived her, although she felt incapable of sustained action. So she lay in a chair, turning the pages of a magazine, whispering, "Keep cool, old thing! This has happened to hundreds of other girls."

But the knowledge shook her like a chill. Cold drops of perspiration bathed her face. She knew she was trapped.

With a great sweeping determination, she conquered her fear.

"Don is coming home. He will be only too glad to release me. We can be married within a week. There is no reason we shouldn't be married. . . ."

She knew that Franklin was more than willing to marry her, ready to defy his mother now that the spell had once been broken. Sonia was confident his affection was sincere. He had said, time after time, "When is your husband coming home? I want to marry you, darling, to claim you openly. . . ."

And once they were married, let the world howl! She would be circumspect all the rest of her life, and people would forget. Why, it had been rumored that one of the older girls in Stockton "had to be married." But everyone had been just as nice

to her as before. Her mother seemed to be as proud as any other grandmother.

"Yes," Sonia decided, "marriage would settle the gossips."

If only Don would hurry! The simple wedding in the shabby parsonage had never happened to her. She had not been that white-faced bride. The disloyalty of that wife had nothing to do with her.

Gradually she became able to face the future without flinching. She was not so wicked. Her sin had been committed in love. Had not Christ himself said, of another woman, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven: for she loved much." (?)

Resignation filled her heart. She saw herself settling down to a quiet, contented life, mistress of a home, mother of a child. Franklin's mother would forgive them after the child was born. Grandmothers were never able to resist babies. They seemed bewitched by tiny, rose-leaf fingers. . . . She knew. She had seen her own mother.

Rocking in the twilight, she told herself that perhaps after all it was best. This was the reason she had not been able to find a position. She would not need it. She was to be sheltered and protected. To realize the dream most girls cherish secretly. She would not regret her youth, her vanished good times. She told herself, complacently, that experience had made her older than her age. She had no more illusions about fairy princes and emeralds and love. The thrills did not last. Life within the grimy four walls of this room had taught her that. There was nothing to the madness which seized you by the throat. . . .

She pictured Franklin changed in their new relations. He insisted he would love her more than ever if she were ill. When he realized why she had been blue so often, he would be more tender. She would tell him as soon as he came, would relate, too, the secret of her cable from Don. He would be less irritable when he knew that Don would be here any day. The strain and stealth had been unpleasant for them both, but it would soon be over. It, too, would be like a dream.

A solemn excitement swept her as she dressed. Don need never know of this new development. He had always been the soul of chivalry. She was sure he would not stand in her way.

The future began to stretch before her like a flowery path. True, she had never cared a great deal for Vera's children.

but her own would be different. It would be a symbol of her love. . . .

"Oh, God, I will be good, I will be worthy. . . ."

She prayed that her father, wherever he might be, would know and understand. . . .

The door swung open and she ran to meet her lover.

His eyes peered at her from reddened lids. He swayed as he shouted, joyously, "Come here, you little devil. Come kiss your papa.

CHAPTER LXXVII

SONIA stared. The words trembling on her lips were never spoken. Instead she said, quietly, "You've broken your promise."

He reeled across to her.

"I'm not drunk."

"You told me you wouldn't take another drink."

He sank into a chair before the table, burying his head in his hands.

"I felt so low, Sonia . . ."

She saw then that he was really intoxicated.

"I couldn't even go to the office today. Been sitting in my own room."

"Drinking alone?"

"Trying to forget . . . God!"

He passed a shaking hand across his eyes.

"Forget what, Franklin? Why do you feel so badly?"

"Last night I drove to Fisherman's Wharf."

His eyes were glassy. His words falling like short, quick stabs from an assassin's knife, plunging into her heart!

"Right back to the place we stood. It wasn't my fault, Sonia. But, God, he won't let me alone . . ."

"Of course it was not your fault," she repeated stonily.

"What happened to Walter Henderson was no fault of yours."

"That's what I tell him. When he follows me I say, 'Look here, Henderson, I had no intention of killing you . . .'"

.

Her hands gripped the chair. The walls clicked about her like the shifting pictures in a kaleidoscope.

"It was like this, Sonia. Do you want me to explain it to you?"

"Explain it to me, yes!"

She prayed to keep her voice steady. Not to frighten him before he had finished every word of that explanation.

"I'm going to tell you the whole thing. I've wanted to tell

you ever since the day you lied to save me. I was sure you'd understand."

"Yes, go on."

"When I met Henderson down by the ferry that night I said, 'Get in. I want to talk to you.'"

"And he did?"

"Did he? He jumped in! . . . Something funny about the way he jumped into my car."

"Go on."

"Well, he started in abusing me. He said I was a damned fool and a few other things. You know how I felt that day, Sonia. I thought it was Walter Henderson you had married . . ."

"Yes, I know."

"When we reached Fisherman's Wharf, we got out and walked up and down the pier. Henderson was as mad as I was, and before I realized it we were fighting."

"Fighting . . . (Oh God!)"

"We were fighting when I hit him. Not much of a blow, but he fell backwards into the water. He must have hit his head. I didn't hit him hard. God, I see him now . . ."

Her hands were on his shoulders. Her voice was as cold as death.

"Tell me the rest of it."

He gazed at her terrified.

"He follows me, I tell you. But it wasn't my fault. I supposed he could swim."

"You didn't wait to see if he came up?"

"Why should I wait for him to get out and pummel me? I got in the car and drove up to the shack, just as I said I did . . ."

He looked at her as if for approval. He waited, almost wistfully, for the comfort which did not come. Sonia said nothing. She stood before him, insane with rage. She wanted to strike him in the face. To knock that winsome, charming mouth into a bloody smear . . ." Her voice, when it came, was chopped with fury.

"And I lied . . . I LIED TO SAVE A MURDERER."

His jaw dropped in astonishment.

He whimpered, "I loved you too much . . ."

"You drunken beast! You snivelling, lying, coward . . ."

Her words cracked about his ears like whips.

"Get out of my sight! If I see you any longer I'll kill you . . ."

She flew after him as he stumbled to the door. It slammed behind him and she fell upon the floor. Screams choked in her breast. She stifled them, beating with her fists.

"I was so sure he was innocent. I never dreamed he had anything to do with it. Oh, why couldn't I have seen? Why didn't I understand?"

Blind! Blind! And the lie she had told to save him had killed her father. She had given herself, joyously, to a murderer, branded her body with his infamy. She could have torn her flesh with cruel, clawing fingers.

That she, who followed only high adventure, should live to bear a murderer's child!

CHAPTER LXXVIII

HOURS passed, but Sonia was not conscious of their passing. She was aching with cold when she dragged herself from the floor. She began to pace the room. Darkness forced her to stop and turn on the electric switch. Her wracking sobs seemed to come from another person.

She had condemned her mother for giving herself illegally. How had she dared to criticize? The lowest woman on the street was better than she. Married to a man like Don Stillwater! Yet how willingly she had offered her sacrifice! With what high courage she had proffered her reputation to save a murderer, and he had told her, even while thanking her, that he could easily have escaped conviction. He had deceived her from the beginning. Yet, piercing to her very heart, came his repeated cry, "I loved you too much . . ."

Weak willed, undisciplined, the son of a doting mother, his character had been slowly undermined. He had'to have whatever his heart was set upon. Sonia shivered as she realized to what depths of suffering he was to descend.

Her infatuation was crushed with a single blow. But the result—the fruit of that intoxicating madness—was not to be eradicated.

She pressed her hands to her heart and snatched them away, loathing them.

"Oh, God, let me die . . ."

Shame, like a red tide, poured over her. For the first time in her life she felt unclean . . .

But women often died in childbirth. Surely she could not live after bearing a child she hated. She would not eat. She would starve. But the pangs of hunger were already a physical nausea, forcing her toward food.

She faced her disheveled, swollen countenance in the mirror, remembering that dancing image of long ago.

She smiled bitterly. God! Aren't you proud of yourself? A pretty mess you've made of things."

Dizzy and faint she sat on the edge of the bed, gulping milk, muttering, "Oh, Lord, I'm sick—I'm so sick!"

In the next breath, "If I could only die!"

The room took on a green, unnatural tinge, the walls undulated up and down. She cried aloud, "I'm dreaming! I've never been to San Francisco."

Of course she was dreaming. Her father would slip to her door in a moment.

"Come, honey, it's time to get up."

How she would surprise him. She would throw her arms around his neck, crying, "Darling, I love you! I've had a terrible dream . . ."

As if she had just heard it, the realization of his death swept home. Pictures flashed before her staring eyes. Her mother pinning up her graduation dress . . .

"Stand still, Sonia . . ."

Her father, insisting on her going to Sunday school.

"Oh, Daddy, why do I have to?"

His patient, anxious face! He had never failed her. How it would hurt him to see her wounded to death—broken, beaten, unclean! Thank God, he had not lived to suffer that. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she told herself she was no longer entitled to sympathy. Everyone had warned her. Even after her father's death, her mother had pleaded with her. Futile, in the face of her passion for Franklin! That passion was burned as with acid, out of her heart, but the scars could never be removed.

She had always detested vice and common vulgarity, had pledged herself to only beautiful adventures. How fate had cheated her! Tricked her into giving her first, fresh love to a coward! It was not altogether her fault, she protested, always ready to shift the blame.

Chin in hand, she looked out over the lighted city, going back to the summer before her birth. Her mother had sinned first.

"What could you expect," asked Sonia bitterly, "of the daughter of a woman who deceived her husband for 20 years?"

She had thought she was free to twist events to suit her pleasure. No more free than a toy in the hands of a malicious child!

How gaily she had come to San Francisco to follow the dark

course already mapped out for her! Her volition had nothing to do with it. But if this were true, Franklin's crime, too, had been inevitable. No one could be held responsible.

Trembling with weakness, she felt the flaw in her reasoning, but was too exhausted to pursue it. Too eager for any loophole of escape!

The future was black. She only knew that she could never face Don. She would hide away from everyone. Move away from this room to another, equally as grimy, possibly more disreputable, exist as she could, do any kind of work she could to keep from going mad. And when work became impossible, she would go to a rescue home and pray for death. . . .

But in the midst of her tragic musing, the door opened and Don Stillwater came back.

CHAPTER LXXIX

SHE faced him, desperately, uncertain if this, too, were not a fragment of her dream.

"Sonia. . . ."

"Don't touch me!"

"But, my dear, I was so surprised when I telephoned your mother. I left you some money. Why would you come here?"

Some last tattered shred of self-respect forced her to control her quivering features. She said, boldly, "Oh, I don't mind it. It's good enough. . . ."

He was watching her too intently.

"Are you ill?"

"No, I'm all right."

"I would have come sooner, but I missed your letter. It was forwarded and followed me for weeks."

"But you got it?" she insisted, almost eagerly, waiting for the blow to fall.

"Yes eventually. Also one from my mother. I was so sorry, Sonia, to hear of your father's death."

"Oh, don't . . ." she begged, choked, tortured.

"Don't blame yourself too much. Your father must have been unbalanced."

She stared at him, fascinated. She could not take her eyes from his rugged, kindly face. Then she moistened dry lips and asked, "Did you come to annul our marriage?"

She saw that his eyes were circled with weariness, his face heavy with pain.

"Annul our marriage? Why? So that you can marry that cur who let you lie for him?"

"Don, you believe I lied."

"Of course, you lied."

She grovelled on the floor before him, hiding her face against the greasy rug.

"For God's sake, Sonia! Never do that again!"

He lifted her roughly, held her in stern, inflexible arms.

"Do you think I wouldn't know you lied? Lied to protect the man you were infatuated with. . . . ! But because you were a fool is no reason for my releasing you. He isn't fit to touch your feet. Do you think I'd ever give you to him now?"

She sobbed, "You would believe in me when my own father thought me guilty?"

"He was not himself, Sonia—worried and overworked all his life. . . ."

She repeated, "You believed in me," wonderingly.

Her heart was soft and as humble as a child's. In that instant she saw the light. The miracle had come, but it was too late. Like another guilty wife, who was a queen, she could have cried:

*"Ah, my God! What might I not have made of thy fair world
Had I but lov'd thy highest creature here?
It was my duty to have lov'd the highest,
It surely was my profit had I known;
It would have been my pleasure had I seen. . . .
We needs must love the highest when we see it. . . ."*

"Sonia," he whispered, "does our marriage mean so little? You came to me to escape Franklin Crane. Do you want to go back to him?"

"Oh, no—I despise him. . . ."

"Then never mention it again."

He lifted her face to his, but she cried, wildly, "Don't kiss me. Please . . ." Her cry was smothered by his lips.

He kissed her passionately. And again shame ran like fire over her desecrated body.

She cried to herself, "You see you can't tell him. You can't destroy his faith in you. Fool, don't you see? You can't escape now."

She began to answer his questions with cheerful mechanical replies. She planned, "Make him think you're all right. Pretend—you must pretend."

He drew her into the big chair.

"You've worried yourself sick over this. Why, I knew the moment I received your letter. When you made no attempt to offer an explanation. I should never have left you, Sonia. But I'll take you with me tonight to my hotel. And our

marriage will be announced in tomorrow's papers. No more of this secret stuff. When Stockton reads that, it will know the truth. Sonia, did you really think I would give you up?"

Pretend now—pretend! "Any other man would."

"After the hour we spent before I went away? Why, you love me, honey. You proved it—that night."

Out of hell, her voice replied, "Oh, Don, I do. . . ."

For a long time he held her, whispering tender condolence, kissing her gently, "My little broken sweetheart, they've almost killed you. . . ."

She lay cold, supine, the blood in her frozen veins circling slower and slower to the death march in her heart.

"I am going to start practicing, Sonia."

"In San Francisco?"

"Yes. I had an offer before I left to go in with Dr. Langdon. It's a splendid opportunity. I'll look him up tomorrow."

"But your study in Berlin?"

"It will have to wait until later. We might as well face the music right here, Sonia. It doesn't help to run away."

He held her face between his hands, well-shaped, sensitive hands, which Sonia had always loved.

"And this time our marriage is to be no farce, my darling. No reservations between us from now on. We will be man and wife."

The significance of his words reached her slowly. It was life he offered, clean, sweet life, with the disgraceful past wiped off the slate. Her mind ticked off the possibilities. If she became his wife immediately, he would have no reason to suspect her when her child was born. Her mother had deceived her husband. Sonia knew she had all Anna's ability for secrecy at her command. She could be silent for 20 years or longer. No one would ever know. Even Franklin Crane had no suspicion of it.

It was her chance. Her one chance to lead a decent life. She prayed the child would die, but if not, the penalty of mothering it would be penalty enough for any woman. . . .

As always, Don had come to her rescue, stretched out a saving hand.

But could she accept it? Could she ever accept anything from him again?

CHAPTER LXXX

DON's voice roused her.

"You rent this room from the people downstairs?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll run down and tell them you're leaving. You can be collecting your things."

She watched him, stunned, until he had closed the door.

A chance for life! He had insisted that when they were married people would soon forget the newspaper story. Her child could be born in wedlock. What? Bring a murderer's child into the world as Don Stillwater's? Have him love and cherish it as Sam Marsh had worshiped her?

"No, I'll die first," cried Sonia.

She knew that death was all that was left to her. Don had believed in her, and he must not lose that faith. But she would not build her future upon a deceit. His words of passionate faith had torn the veil from her eyes. He was the only man in her life who had been worth loving. And she was nothing but a snivelling coward, attempting to justify her sin by that of her mother.

"I have been a fool," she whispered. "What my mother did is no excuse for me. I have lived my own life and I am responsible for the wreck I've made of it. I alone must pay the penalty."

She paced the floor with limbs so faint that blackness enveloped her. But she knew with sickening certainty the exact corner where the tiny poison tablets stood. Oh, God, for strength to take them! If they would only kill her instantly, painlessly . . . !

She thought of other methods of suicide. Drowning would have been so much easier. Just to walk out into cool, green waves . . . or shoot herself in the heart as her father had done. But there was no time. What she might do must be

done quickly, before she went to the hotel with him. She might never have the courage again.

If only he hadn't loved her so much! If only he would leave her with harsh words, so that she might have crept away.

She was fumbling with the door to the medicine closet, reaching to the top shelf. . . .

She whimpered, "Oh, I'm afraid. I didn't want to do it this way. God, don't let it hurt. . . ."

Uncorking the bottle, pouring the tablets into an icy hand . . .

Something shrieked like a fiend inside her. "It's not too late—put them back. What good will your death do? More grief? Live right from now on and take the chance he's offering you. . . ."

Then her father's loving face.

"But she would never treat Don Stillwater like that. . . ."

"God help me. . . ."

Then she had taken them and peace descended like stagnant waters about her soul.

She had just time to replace the bottle before Don entered. She faced him, smiling, "Ready? I haven't even started to pack." Pain tore at her like an infuriated demon.

"Oh Don—God . . ."

"Sonia, what is it?"

She was writhing on the floor.

"You've taken something. What was it? Tell me quickly."

"Mistake—medicine. . . ."

He had opened the medicine cabinet, was pulling down bottles.

"Was it this, Sonia?"

But she was past answering him, past seeing or caring for anything but the raw agony of torture she must endure.

He forced her to drink the white of an egg beaten in a cup. He poured glass after glass of warm salt water between her lips.

"Oh, Sonia, why couldn't you have trusted me?"

Black, terrible anguish enveloped her like a cloud. She was only writhing, convulsive flesh, shrieking to a relentless God—a God who would not hear!

She realized she was being taken to a hospital. She saw faces through cold mists of pain. She begged for death, and

they only inflicted new tortures. Conscious of ghastly retching that tore her apart.

And when at last she lay as one dead on her pillows, a nurse came, a strange nurse who said, "Mrs. Stillwater, your condition makes it necessary for you to control yourself. You are going to be ill for a little while, but it will soon be over. We are going to do everything we can to keep you from suffering. Help us with all the strength you have. . . ."

Presently she knew what that strange voice had meant. Through a haze of weakness she saw Don's haggard face. She groped blindly toward him . . .

"Please hold my hand, Don."

She grasped it firmly. Hanging on like a drowning child, she cried, "You—you're God. . . ."

And went down, quickly, into waters that swirled higher and higher. . . .

CHAPTER LXXXI

HOURS or days? What did it matter? Weakness that made it impossible to lift one's hand! Glass tubes which were forced between one's lips, at intervals. One swallowed liquids, with closed eyes.

Now, Mrs. Stillwater, drink this—you're better this morning—she had a good night, Doctor—Yes, we will try that for awhile."

Words. Meaningless, empty phrases, which did not concern Sonia. She lay, a lump of inanimate flesh in a hospital bed. But her spirit fluttered about vast, open spaces, unbound, released from that tortured body. She felt it dipping and soaring into the unknown, peering at Death, but never going quite far enough. . . .

One day Don's voice came to her so clearly that she opened her eyes.

"Hello there. . . ."

Her eyes filled with tears.

"Don, I'm sorry. . . ."

"Now, no explanations!"

"But I must tell you. . . ."

"Not until you're stronger. Everything is fine."

She sighed. He must know everything. But she was too exhausted not to snatch at the peace he offered. So she rested. She slept long hours of the night and day. She began to distinguish faces and the different touch of the nurses, and finally sat up in bed and drank from a cup.

Then she knew the time had come. When Don came that afternoon he seemed to understand it, too, for he made no attempt at evasions.

"I want to talk with you, Don."

He closed the door and came back to her bed. But he did not sit down. His face was ghastly.

"I suppose you can guess what it is?"

"Yes."

"I was a wilful, wicked fool. After I'd lied to save him I thought—what did it matter . . . ?"

"It did not occur to you that I might love you enough to believe in you?"

Shame dyed her pallid cheeks.

"No. And I had denied myself for so long! It seemed I had to do it. I thought of other girls doing it and getting by . . . Oh, I know all the arguments, but at the time my mind simply refused to function."

He said, between white lips, "Your marriage vows—your promises to me meant nothing?"

"Not after the story that came out in the papers. How could I expect you not to believe that?"

"You've known me rather a long time. . . ."

"Oh, Don," she cried, "I told you there wasn't any excuse. Just say that I was determined to go wrong."

"But I don't believe that, Sonia. Nothing can ever make me believe that."

She shut her heart to the longing in his voice.

"When I went home and saw my father, whose death I had caused . . ." She stopped, vowing never to reveal her mother's secret. "I came back to San Francisco to go to work. Jed Thomas would not take me back, so I came here, living on your money."

"Seeing Crane?"

"Yes. We spent the weekends at his shack. I was restless and dissatisfied. It brought me no happiness. But the tie seemed too strong to break."

Then she added, "Don, you know EVERYTHING?"

"Yes. But the poison you took and the strenuous antidotes we were forced to use, were too much for your condition."

He turned away. He was fumbling with the cord of the window curtain, and when he faced her again his eyes were full of tears.

"Did you think you were deceiving me, Sonia? I suspected it the moment I entered your room."

"You suspected THAT?"

"I was afraid of it."

Her green eyes were wide with surprise.

"But you insisted on our staying married, on our living together!"

"I saw by your face that you were on the verge of desperation. I thought if I could get you away, you would see that I intended to stand by you and let you tell me the truth."

Her voice was the merest whisper.

"And if I had?"

"I would have protected you until the child was born. After that . . ."

He shrugged patient shoulders. "Well, whatever seemed best."

Both were silent for a moment, then he said, "Crane has disappeared. I may as well tell you I suspect him in connection with the drowning of Henderson."

"So you knew that, too?" she cried, and told him how she had learned the truth.

The moments ticked away. She knew their conversation was not finished. There had been none of the agonized scene she had dreaded. He seemed to know everything she had to tell him. But she swallowed over the lump of shame and embarrassment which sat like a weight in her throat, and said. "I want to thank you. Not for saving my life. That is not so important, but for giving me back my self-respect."

He patted her hands.

"I'm glad to hear you say that, Sonia. The thing to do now is forget."

The smile on her pale lips was too old for any girl to wear.

"I'll never do that."

"You can forget the details of it," he replied, cheerfully. "Some day it too will seem like a dream."

Then she said, "We'll get an annulment as soon as possible, Don."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Go home for awhile. When I'm well enough, I'll come back and go to work again."

His reply was so low she could not be sure she heard.

"Can't what?"

"Can't let you go to work. You see, we'll still be married."

She looked at him with wonder and unutterable gratitude.

"Do you think I would accept a sacrifice like that?"

"No sacrifice. . . ."

"Never," she said, firmly, over the sobs breaking in her throat.

As if the scene had become too much for him, he turned and fled from the room.

CHAPTER LXXXII

SONIA'S nurse was bringing fresh flowers.

"You're a lucky girl," she smiled.

Lucky!

"Yes, I am," Sonia replied, gravely. "Did—my husband send those?"

"He certainly did. I never saw a more devoted man. And believe me, we see all kinds."

Sonia watched her arranging the yellow roses so their reflection caught in the mirror.

"I suppose you do. All kinds of women, too?"

"Yes," the other continued, cheerfully. "And what we see makes us decide the world is rotten. The poor young things who come in to have their babies all alone. . . . You wives with husbands like Dr. Stillwater don't know what it is . . ."

Sonia said nothing.

I said to Miss Gilbert, who was head nurse on the floor the night you came in, "isn't it a shame? Some women don't know when they're lucky."

As if, thought Sonia hotly, any woman would not be proud to bear Don Stillwater's child. The thought brought stinging tears to her eyes.

"Oh, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, dear. You're so young and I suppose you were terribly frightened . . . Next time I bet you'll go through it like a little soldier."

Sonia was too angry and confused to answer. So after a moment the nurse began to hum a little tune and stole from the room.

All that day Sonia pondered.

"Always fighting a battle for some one," his mother had said. Well, he had saved her body and soul, but she would accept no more. They had not discussed the future since the astonishing moment when he hurried from her room. But

as Sonia's strength returned she became more grimly determined.

Don came every day. His flowers filled the room. And while she was grateful for the part he was playing, she realized it must come to an end. Meanwhile Don had bought a newspaper with the announcement of their marriage. And one afternoon, when she was lying, quietly, doing nothing, Jed Thomas entered her room.

She was so startled the color came into her cheeks.

"I asked Don if I might come," he said, composedly.

"It is very good of you. Will you sit down?"

Her voice was stiff and unnatural. What did this incomprehensible man—she refused to consider him as a father—have to say to her?

He advanced to the bed.

"I wish to beg your pardon—from the bottom of a repentant heart. It is almost impossible for a hard-headed business man to comprehend the generosity of a girl like you. But I should have understood your testimony at the inquest."

The sincerity of his words was evident. Sonia lowered her eyes. She could not bear to face him. But she must carry the deception through.

"It's all right," she said, abruptly. "No harm done."

"The fact is," he said, rigidly, "that you will never forgive me. But for Don's sake . . . although he is my wife's nephew I am very fond of Don . . ." He left the sentence unfinished.

Looking at him, then, she was amazed to see tears in his eyes, still more amazed to feel tears rising in her own.

"Can't we be friends?"

As they clasped hands she knew it was the beginning of an intimate relationship. The spark of contact between two similar natures had been achieved.

Don was pleased with his uncle's visit.

"That was decent of him, Sonia. You don't know how difficult an apology is for him."

Didn't she, though? When it meant precisely the same degree of mental agony to her! But she said nothing, watching him with eyes that were almost humble.

He said, cheerfully, "My aunt wants to come, too."

Sonia said, resolutely, "I hope you won't let her."

"Not if you'd rather not."

"I don't want to see her. Please!"

"All right, Sonia."

There was silence until she asked, "How soon can I leave the hospital?"

"Almost any time—a couple of days."

"Will I be strong enough to go directly to Stockton?"

"Not right away. I'd better get you a room at my hotel."

She said no more. But he came and knelt beside her bed.

"I love you. I want you, honey."

She permitted him to kiss her hand, controlling the sobs beating furiously in her throat, praying for courage! For she knew now that there would be only one way to make him let her go.

CHAPTER LXXXIII

STARTING to leave the security of the hospital for the world outside! Sonia had become accustomed to the four walls of her room. She had found peace there under the protection of Don's name.

Doctors and nurses smiled as he took her away. How little they dreamed of the hideous depths her soul had plumbed.

She sat beside him in the taxi, worshiping the outline of his rather gaunt face, wishing she dared to touch his hand.

They were returning to his hotel. Sonia's teeth chattered with nervousness as they ascended to their floor. When they were alone, Don suggested that she go directly to bed.

Like a frightened child she obeyed . . .

But her strength returned. In a few days she knew she was well enough to go to Stockton. When Don came in after a day with Dr. Langdon, he found she had been packing.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," she said.

He sat down, asking, quietly, "want me to come along?"

"No. I'd rather go alone. I left in disgrace, you know."

"You'll find that changed, I think."

"Well, it won't remain so," she said, cheerfully. "Once they realize we aren't living together."

"We're going to live together, after you've stayed with your mother awhile. Look here, Sonia, we'll admit you've made a mistake. But is that any reason for ruining your entire life?"

"You think not living with you will ruin my entire life?"

He turned away.

Her voice was mechanically bright, as she continued.

"Don't think I don't appreciate all you've done. I meant what I said that night. You were God snatching me from a living hell."

"All right." His smile was grim. "Granted I'm a hero with laurel wreaths across my brow. . . . is that any reason for severing our marriage?"

"It's not a marriage."

"If you look it up in the records you'll find it is."

"You know what I mean. It started wrong, the result of my selfish impulse."

"It has been of sufficient weight to hold during these last weeks," he replied, resolutely.

"Oh, Don . . ."

"I see no reason," he insisted, "why it should not continue."

Her eyes filled with tears, but she brushed them away. He was forcing her to the brutal course she had planned.

She cried, "I don't want pity!"

He seized her shoulders.

"Don't be a fool. You know it isn't that."

As suddenly as he had seized her he let her go.

"You know I love you. I've loved you ever since the day I made you kiss me. When I held you in my arms I knew I could never let you go."

Her heart was throbbing in her breast like a wounded, broken bird. Tears burned in her eyes.

"Don't make love to me, please."

"Why shouldn't I?" he cried passionately.

Her head was high.

"Because it's bad taste. You've done everything for me a man could do. But I do not wish our marriage to hold."

"You mean . . ."

"Even if I am an outcast," she said, proudly, "I reserve the right to love where I please."

His eyes were like a suffering child's.

"I beg your pardon. I have been a conceited ass . . ."

"Not at all," she answered, brightly. "You've been wonderful and I'm as grateful as any girl could be."

"Grateful, but you don't love me!"

"Marriage is too serious, Don. I've learned my lesson but I don't care to be a wife—even to you."

He faced her desperately.

"YOU DON'T LOVE ME?"

For the second time in her life, Sonia lied.

Immediately he left her room. She had accomplished her purpose. He was too big and fine to be married to a cheat. He had given her back her soul. In return, she would rescue his. The knowledge should have given her joy. But she buried her head in the pillows and cried as if her heart would break.

CHAPTER LXXXIV

SONIA returned to her native town, not quite a year since she had departed for San Francisco, awake all night for fear of missing a thrill.

With what a burden of wisdom she returned! Scarred and old beyond her years, but not broken, thank God!

Thank Don Stillwater, who had shown her what a wonderful thing real love might be.

Her mother met the boat.

She cried, "Sonia," with desperate hunger in her voice.

"Dear God," thought Sonia, "she's wondering if I have forgiven her."

Her thin arms grasped Anna tightly.

"Mother, darling!"

She could have wept to see the naked joy that flared in Anna's face. How she must have reproached herself during those lonely years! How many nights she must have tossed in bitter self-loathing! Oh, how well Sonia could imagine now the price her mother had paid!

When they were home, Anna said, "You're so pale. You must have been dreadfully ill."

"I was."

"Don wrote that you had taken the wrong medicine, by mistake. Sonia, what I told you had nothing to do with it?"

"Not a thing, mother."

"I tried to tell myself it hadn't," Anna continued, wiping her eyes. "But I was so afraid. . . ."

"Let's not talk about it, please."

Suddenly Sonia realized that she was very tired and glad to be at home. Inside the drab living room, buried in the comfort of the faded davenport, but safe!

Her mother brought tea, and while Sonia lay nibbling a piece of buttered toast, Vera came.

Vera made a great fuss with the children.

"Kiss Aunt Sonia. . . . Don't you think the baby's grown? Paul thinks he is going to look like me."

The old Vera, but with reservations in her eyes. She would do her best toward Sonia.

When Anna had taken the children into the kitchen for bread and jelly, Vera said, "Sonia, I was so surprised to hear you and Don were married. I think you might have told me. . . ."

"It wasn't an ordinary marriage," explained Sonia, with lowered eyes.

"Well, of course, I suspected that. Still it makes everything look very different. Just as Paul says, if we had known. . . ."

"What Paul says doesn't matter a tinker's damn to me."

Vera looked shocked and Sonia swept on, surprised to find the old animosity against her brother-in-law—rather pleasantly reassuring.

"I mean it. Paul makes me tired. If he suits you, why that's dandy, but don't quote him to me."

"I can't understand why you're so unfair to him."

"Perhaps you can the next time you're tired and ill and he goes storming out of the house."

Vera looked thoughtful.

"I will admit he wasn't very kind, but he's made up for it since."

Again that dark, sweet look in her sister's eyes. The look which had hurt Sonia a year before, but she understood it now—understood so well that her hand reached out for Vera's arm.

"I know, old thing. . . ."

The next day Mrs. Raymond Stillwater called. Sonia was reading on the davenport when she knocked at the door. She asked if she might speak with Sonia alone, and when Anna had gone she said, "Sonia, I've had a letter from Don."

Sonia met her eyes, unafraid.

"You needn't worry, Mrs. Stillwater. I've made him see how impossible the situation is."

"But he has announced your marriage."

"That was foolish," admitted Sonia. "But it can all be undone."

She was so tired of explanations. So deathly tired. But because this woman was the mother of Don Stillwater, Sonia told herself she would have endured anything.

She said, gently, "Please trust me. I'm going to give him back to you."

She was amazed to see those proud, dark eyes swimming in tears. To feel the older woman's hand close over hers.

"I don't want you to give him up, Sonia. Don loves you. Do you think I can't read the heart of my own son?"

Trembling, Sonia faltered, "He'll get over it. There will be some one else."

"You're breaking his heart. Don Stillwater is a one woman man."

Then Sonia put her head in the older woman's lap and burst into tears.

"You wouldn't want me to love him if you knew. . . ."

"I don't believe a word of it," Don's mother cried, smartly. "My boy couldn't love a girl who wasn't clean and fine. I don't care a fig what anyone says."

In spite of her troubled heart, Sonia smiled.

"No wonder he's different with a mother like you."

"Don't try to flatter me. I'm no fool, my dear, if I am a doting mother. But you be good to Don."

CHAPTER LXXXV

SONIA helped her mother. She sat long hours basting and hemming for Stockton customers. In these hours of quiet sewing and talking, he grew to appreciate her mother as never before. The patience of a genius, the skill of an artist belonged to Anna Marsh. Because she was able to create beautiful things, she had found peace in her dressmaking. For her there was pure joy in colors and lines.

Under Sonia's loving attention, she blossomed into a half-shy youthfulness. They went to church together; to the "movies"; to a party at Vera's. She developed a smile, which delighted Sonia, as no words of gratitude could have done. She had succeeded in helping her mother achieve happiness. What a relief it must have been to know that her guilty secret was shared, yet she was not condemned!

It would soon be graduation time again. Sonia planned to return to San Francisco before her friends came home from college. She had decided to ask Jed Thomas to help her secure a position, although she could never go back to the real estate office. So she wrote to him and had just received his answer, when she saw Don coming from the boat.

It seemed good to see him again, although the color left her face at the look in his eyes.

He said, matter-of-factly, "Going home, Sonia?"

"Yes. I have a letter from your uncle."

"Uncle Jed told me you were ready to come back to San Francisco."

The color deepened in her face.

"He said he would be glad to help me."

"Yes, he will."

She asked about his work. As always, when his profession was mentioned, he waxed eloquent.

"What a man he is," she thought. "I was right. Nothing will ever break him."

She thought it proudly, but with unbearable pain.

When they reached home he followed her into the house.

Sonia was sure her mother had seen them coming. The living room was vacant, but Mrs. Underwood's new crepe dangled over a chair.

She smiled.

"You see how I've been using my time? Hundreds of my fair stitches are preserved in that creation . . ."

He dropped the bag he carried, and coming up to her, took her in his arms.

"Honey," he said, "you lie like a gentleman but hotel walls are thin. In the night I heard you crying . . ."

THE END

